



March 2022 CHNewsletter

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THE COMING HOME NETWORK INTERNATIONAL



A Most Unexpected Journey

By Ron Ratliff

There's a saying that goes, "If you want to make God laugh, tell Him your plans." My own life has proved just how true that is. I was an evangelical Protestant, educated at Dallas Theological Seminary, but my search for truth led me to enter the Catholic Church in 2011. My journey from a strong anti-Catholic to a Catholic convert is what this tale is about... with some wonderful twists and turns along the way.

My Early Years

I was born in 1954 in Junction City, Kansas. My family went to church weekly, and I grew up with church being a regular part of my life. The church that I attended, along with most of my friends, was associated with the Stone-Campbell Restorationist Movement.

My church was blessed to have godly men as leaders, especially the youth leaders. I don't recall any legalism. This was the era, in the late 60s and early 70s, of the Jesus Movement, and we youngsters found it to our liking. Faith was a natural part of my life. I was interested in growing in my faith and, on occasion, would speak up about it in high school. I recall a class in which the ethnicity of Jesus came up for discussion. A number of students offered their ideas on what Jesus might have looked like. I spoke up, noting that Jesus, being a Jew living in Israel, would likely have had dark skin and dark hair. I insisted that Jesus definitely didn't look like the many paintings that depicted Him as if He were from Norway instead of Israel. The class agreed.

While I had been raised in a local church, and the Christian faith had always been a significant part of my life, it wasn't until I began dating a long-time friend named Jeannie that I got serious about my faith. In the spring of 1973, I made a commitment to Christ that would stay with me. Jeannie's foster father was the pastor of our church, and he and his wife were instrumental in my commitment. Jeannie and I were also married that year, and I began to attend Bible college full-time.

In my early years as an adult Christian, my wife and I became involved in the charismatic movement. Along with friends, we attended a number of local charismatic meetings and Bible studies. Yet, after a couple of years, I noticed a decided lack of growth and depth to these meetings. My hunger for learning was deepening. Before long, we left the charismatic movement.

Within a few years, I moved from the church in which I grew up to a Baptist church. I was then interviewing local pastors for a college assignment. One such interview involved a pastor who had graduated from Dallas

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Journey Home

...Journeys Home Continued...

Theological Seminary. His expositional sermons, followed by his friendship, were the reasons we left our earlier church. His influence also moved me to consider seminary.

Therefore, after graduating from Bible college, we moved to Texas so I could attend Dallas Theological Seminary. My time at Dallas was incredible, and I earned a Master of Theology degree there in 1983. Dallas molded me into a strong evangelical Protestant, complete with an equally-strong, anti-Catholic side. While Catholicism did not come up for discussion very often, I knew it was wrong, and I certainly didn't believe that Catholics were "saved." Little did I suspect what God had in mind for me!

Pastoral Failure

After seminary, I returned to my home church, and my world was blown to bits. I had intended to take a few classes at Kansas

State University to beef up my counseling skills, as well as look for a church to pastor. I was asked to serve as an elder at my local North American Baptist church, but I got embroiled in a difficult church situation that I should have avoided. However, wanting to help, I dove in. Young and naïve, I made some comments that I should not have made and soon found myself being blamed for a long list of things.

This incident sent me spiraling into several years of depression. It put a strain on my marriage, and I was not able to find a church to pastor. Indeed, I was convinced that I was not cut out to be a pastor.

My discouragement went so far that I began to question my faith and was on my way to becoming a skeptic. I sold my theological library and returned to college to get a degree in English to become a high school teacher.

A couple of years later, I was still angry and resentful and saw God as a kind of Cosmic Joker who took delight in pulling the rug out from under me. Being an English major, I began to absorb the writings of skeptics like Mark Twain, Stephen Crane, and James Joyce. My attitude developed into a dangerous combination of disillusionment and anger, fueled by those skeptics whose works I devoured.

I believe that, in such times as these, God continues watching over us even though we don't realize it until some time later. Looking back on those years, I can see God was moving the mixed-up pieces of my life into position like a giant puzzle. He would eventually lead me on an entirely different path concerning my faith, but I just couldn't see it at the time.

Enter C.S. Lewis

Things reached a climax when I took a course that required me to read aloud a passage from a work of literature. For reasons I will never fully understand, I selected one of the few Christian books on my shelves: *A Grief Observed* by C.S. Lewis. Reading this book hit me right in the heart. For the first time in years, here was someone whose pain and heartache spoke to me in a way that I could understand. I was slowly pulled back from the brink of skepticism.

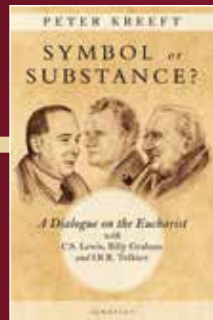
Not long after that incident, I began what would be a 13-year stint preaching at a couple of small churches. For about two years, I preached at a small, conservative Congregational church. Then I preached at a small, non-denominational church for 11 years. This enabled me to use my gifts and continue to heal from the hurt I incurred as an elder at my earlier Baptist church.

During these years, I was also a school teacher and, later, a full-time librarian. These were years of continued learning, and it was enjoyable to serve in a way that left me feeling comfortable. But, of course, we all know that God doesn't set us up for comfort – at least, not for very long.

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SYMBOL OR SUBSTANCE?*

A DIALOGUE ON THE EUCHARIST
WITH C.S. LEWIS, BILLY
GRAHAM, AND J.R.R.
TOLKIEN BY PETER KREEFT



In this engaging fictional conversation, Peter Kreeft gives credible voices to C. S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien, and Billy Graham as they discuss one of the most contentious questions in the history of Christianity: Is Jesus symbolically or substantially present in the Eucharist?

These widely-respected modern Christian witnesses represent three important Western theological traditions. Graham, an ordained Southern Baptist minister who traversed the world and the airwaves to spread the good news of salvation, represents evangelical Protestantism. Lewis, an Oxford professor, a prolific Christian apologist, and the author of *The Chronicles of Narnia*, was a member of the Church of England. Also an Oxford don, Tolkien was a friend of Lewis, the author of *The Lord of the Rings*, and a Roman Catholic.

While Lewis and Tolkien likely discussed the Eucharist during their long friendship, the conversation in this book never took place—but it could have, says Kreeft, who faithfully presents the views of these three impressive men.

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

*Limited quantities available, while supplies last

Another Encounter with Lewis

Around the late 1990s, something began to gnaw at me. It was a restlessness, a sense that there was something missing in my Christian life, but I couldn't put my finger on it. Like many other times in my life, a book appeared that would set me off on a journey that I wasn't looking for. That book was *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* by Mark Noll. This book was, for me, like throwing a match into a box of tinder. Noll seemed to be addressing all my concerns at once, and a desire for more of this thinking settled upon me.

Soon, the circumstances of my life began to move in a providential fashion. I went to work at a university as a humanities librarian. One of my duties was to become involved in research and presentations. In this environment, I stumbled across the C.S. Lewis Foundation. They offered conferences with academic paper sessions. So C.S. Lewis re-entered my life in a strong way.

I began to read a great deal of Lewis, and as I read, he ignited my imagination. While he wasn't officially a Catholic, he was very "Catholic" in many other ways. Through reading him, I came into contact with other authors like J.R.R. Tolkien, G.K. Chesterton, and George MacDonald. If that were not enough, in 2001 a movie called *The Fellowship of the Ring* came out. I had friends who had been urging me to read *The Lord of the Rings* for years, but I had turned a deaf ear to them. Instead, I went and saw the film. When it was over, I sat in the theatre with my mouth open, completely blown away. I was hooked.

A thousand things were running through my mind, and I was trying to figure out what God was saying to me. However, Catholicism was not on my list of possibilities. Actually, that would have been the last thing I would have considered. I had always been a die-hard anti-Catholic. But now, I was going to have to re-think all that.

A Visit to England

In 2002 a dream came true for me. I had wanted to visit England for as long as I could remember. I submitted a paper idea to the C.S. Lewis Foundation for their triennial conference in Oxford and Cambridge, England. To my delight, my paper was accepted for their academic paper section.

England was everything I had imagined and more. I toured Magdalen College, where C.S. Lewis had taught, and his home, The Kilns. The week in Cambridge was highlighted by a visit to Ely Cathedral. Naturally, for a kid from Kansas, this was my first visit to a medieval cathedral. I was in utter awe of it. As I listened to the choir sing, it hit me that Christians had been coming to this site for centuries and that the Christian faith was much more ancient than I had ever allowed myself to consider. Why hadn't I thought of these things before? Why had I been so narrow in my outlook?

While in Cambridge, I attended a Church of England service. When I went forward to receive Communion, a couple things happened. First, I knelt to receive, something I had never done

before in my Protestant churches. As the priest came to me, I put out my hands like everyone else was doing. When he got to me, I looked up at him. He looked me in the eyes, held up the host, said, "This is the Body of Christ," and placed it in my hand. Out of the depths of my impoverished soul, I burst into tears – not just my eyes tearing up, but actual sobs emerged from me. Moments later, the chalice minister stood in front of me and said, "This is the Blood of Christ." Once again the tears flowed. I was completely undone!

Now, I was still nine years away from becoming a Catholic, but then and there I became a believer in the Real Presence of Christ. The chase was on.

Plunging into a Great Sea of Books

Upon my return from the conference, I left the evangelical Protestant world that I had known and became an Anglican. My wife did not meet this move with much enthusiasm. She had carried her own grief from the previous church hurts we had endured; however, she was not attracted to a liturgical church. Still, she was supportive of my decision to become an Anglican.

I managed to find a conservative Episcopal parish and thought I had found what I was looking for. I figured that, if Anglicanism was good enough for Lewis, it was good enough for me. But there were problems. First of all, the Episcopal Church was in the midst of a great doctrinal battle. The parish I attended was solid, but for how long?

The other problem was my reading. I came to see that my anti-Catholic feelings were not based on Catholic writers. I hadn't read any, and eventually, I realized that I was being intellectually dishonest in rejecting something I knew nothing about.

I began to watch EWTN and dip into some Catholic writers, and I found them to be quite good. Soon, I reached the point where I realized that I would have to lower my defenses regarding Catholicism. When I did, who do you think was standing on the other side of the wall I had constructed? G.K. Chesterton! I began to read Chesterton and found his mirth and sharpness of mind irresistible. He made complete sense, gently nudging me ahead. I began reading other Catholic writers, like Flannery O'Connor, Thomas Merton, Dorothy Day, and George Weigel.

My progress was one step forward and three steps back. It began to dawn on me that Catholicism was making perfect sense, and it scared me to death! There was no way I could become Catholic. Somehow, I could sense Chesterton having a good laugh at my expense.

An Unexpected Friendship

There are times in our lives when God moves in a way that we could never have imagined. It is often a life-changing experience. In 2006, deciding on a new path, I moved from the state university to a Christian liberal arts college. I had an idea for an academic paper for a 2008 C.S. Lewis Foundation conference. I

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Discovering Lent

By Matt Swaim

Each spring, the Church calls us to journey together as a family through Lent, a liturgical season marked by prayer, fasting, and almsgiving. From Ash Wednesday to Easter, we have an opportunity to purify our hearts, simplify our lives, and focus on the needs of others in preparation for the mysteries of Holy Week.

These 40 days are a reminder of so many events in salvation history: the 40 days and nights of rain in the days of Noah, the 40 years that the Hebrew children spent in the wilderness, and, of course, the 40 days that Our Lord Himself fasted in the desert. Each of those events was a period of preparation before entering into a new promise of life: Noah stepped off the ark and into a new covenant with God. The Israelites ended their journey in the desert by entering into a new life in the Promised Land. And Jesus emerged from His 40 days in the desert to begin His public ministry.

For many of our members who come from a variety of Christian backgrounds, Lent is something of a foreign concept. On the other hand, members who come from more liturgical forms of Christianity have celebrated this tradition before. We asked participants in our CHNetwork Online Community to share a bit of their previous experiences with the Lenten season, as well as their current attitudes toward its practices.

"As a Baptist we did not observe or talk about Lent. There were no real spiritual seasons that I remember. Now that I am Catholic, I bask in the wonder of Lent and Advent. These seasons are so deep with regard to how they purify the interior and give us an opportunity to really go deep. The word 'silence' comes to mind when I think of Lent. Not having this season growing up or as a pastor, I now appreciate the journey that it truly is." — **Michael, former Baptist pastor**

"I only had a limited exposure to Lenten traditions in the Episcopal Church. I went to the Ash Wednesday service for the Imposition of Ashes, and Sunday services were more subdued, but otherwise my day-to-day was unchanged. The Catholic Lenten traditions will be new for me this year." — **Aaron B.**

"While the Plymouth Brethren did not celebrate the seasons, nor do I ever remember hearing about fasting, the Episcopal Church... did celebrate Lent with violet vestments. Yet little emphasis was placed on penitential disciplines. Nevertheless, since I had been reading the spiritual masters, I tried to make Lent special, especially after I became an Episcopal priest, both with fasting and spiritual reading."

— **Fr. Peter Davids**

"In the Baptist Church, Church of the Nazarene, Assemblies of God, and non-denominational churches, [Lent was not observed]. It was only when I became an Episcopalian that I encountered the Church Year and was very drawn to the penitential practices. Then I discovered Lent, and I loved it!" — **Rosemary A.**

"I come from a strong Evangelical background and had NEVER, ever heard of the word 'Lent.' I say this because I was TOTALLY ignorant of anything sacramental or liturgical. And I pastored one of the largest churches in the Dallas/Ft. Worth area back in the 70s." — **Paul, former Evangelical pastor**

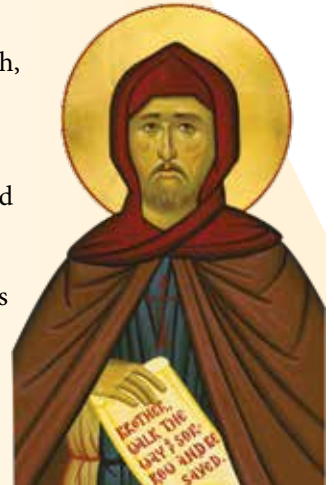
As you can see, some of the people we work with are experiencing Lent for the first time this year! This is an especially important time for these members who are using this Lenten season to prepare for their entry into full communion with the Catholic Church at the Easter Vigil. Please pray for them as they make their final preparations!

As Pope Benedict XVI reminded us in his 2013 Lenten message, "The celebration of Lent... offers us a valuable opportunity to meditate on the relationship between faith and charity: between believing in God – the God of Jesus Christ – and love, which is the fruit of the Holy Spirit and which guides us on the path of devotion to God and others."¹

This Lent, we are praying for all of you as we journey together toward the mystery of Christ's passion, death, and resurrection. May our prayer, fasting, and almsgiving lead us into a greater relationship with the Lord, who by His own death has won victory over the grave! ■

Lenten Prayer of St. Ephrem the Syrian

O, Lord and Master of my life!
Take from me the spirit of sloth,
faint-heartedness,
lust of power, and idle talk.
But give, rather, the spirit of
chastity, humility, patience, and
love to Your servant.
O, Lord and King!
Grant me to see my own errors
and not to judge
my neighbor;
for You are blessed
forever and ever.
Amen.



1 https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/messages/lent/documents/hf_ben-xvi_mes_20121015_lent-2013.html

DONOR SPOTLIGHT

RALPH & LYNDA WRIGHT — 18 YEARS

Desiring to invest in efforts that spread the fullness of the faith, Ralph and Lynda began financially supporting the CHNetwork annually in 2004. Over the years, their own faith has been built up as they have witnessed their support help countless Christian workers become Catholic and thereby infuse new life and passion into the Church.

Ralph was raised in a family with a devout Catholic mother and a father who respected Catholicism enough to send their five children to Catholic school. Lynda was raised Methodist in a small town where Sunday school and church youth group functions were the norms. The few Catholics that Lynda met growing up had a profound impact on her. In college, a Catholic friend taught her the Rosary and other Catholic traditions. However, in deference to her parents, who she thought may struggle with her becoming Catholic, Lynda joined the campus Episcopal chapel.

When Ralph and Lynda met, Ralph was not regularly attending Mass, but they were married in the little Catholic church in Lynda's hometown in order to honor Ralph's recently-widowed mother. Family life brought faith back to the forefront of their lives. They began attending a small Episcopal church. Over time, the Episcopal denomination drifted too far away from the influence of the Catholic Church, consequently drawing Ralph back to his Catholic roots. Ralph and Lynda came home to St. Thomas More Catholic Church largely through meaningful relationships with people in the parish and its school.

As their family matured, they became more intentional in living out and sharing their faith together. During this season of discovery and increased involvement in different ministries, Ralph and Lynda

were introduced to *The Journey Home* on EWTN. The conversion stories shared by the CHNetwork affirmed their faith in new ways. Through the CHNetwork, Ralph and Lynda began to spend more time reading Church history and Bible commentaries and became active in structured Bible study that used materials like *The Great Adventure Bible Studies*. People like Marcus Grodi, Scott Hahn, Jeff Cavins, Tim Gray, Ed Sri, and Bishop Barron became meaningful influences in the growth of their faith, and they now encourage all Catholics to own and study a copy of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*.



THANK YOU to all our donors who, like Ralph and Lynda, are dedicated to helping our apostolate serve both clergy and laity on their journeys of faith toward the Catholic Church.

If you are new to the CHNetwork, please join our faithful donors, and your annual donation will make an eternal difference in the lives of others, as well as help your own faith to grow. ■

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.

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janna@chnetwork.org
740.450.1175 x102

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



EWTVN'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

March 7

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

March 14

Dr. Andrew Blaski*
(former Anglican and non-
denominational Christian)

March 21

Fr. Sebastian White*
(former Evangelical and Anglican)
(re-air from 4/29/19)

March 28

Dr. Gavin Ashenden*
(former Anglican bishop)

April 7

Elvis Grbac*
(Catholic revert)
(re-air from 5/13/19)

*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 David, a revert "Since [my] Confirmation, I have started teaching the 7th grade class at my parish. I reached out to a few people to see what was required to be a deacon. That process is a few years away but is on my radar. The people are wonderful, and I am finding the Catholic doctrines very, very deep and informative. The depth of the Catholic Church far outweighs the depth of the Pentecostal churches I was once a part of. This richness has allowed me to see God in wonderful new ways. And the Mass keeps getting better and better. All in all, I am finding depth in God and His Church. In many ways, it is starting to feel like home."

From Mary, a recent convert "So far, being a Catholic is the brightest part of my life. Maybe I will 'get over it' in time, but just now it's a joy to go to Mass every day and follow the lectionary readings. I feel as though I can never learn enough. I especially love giving the responses--in the course of a day, I say all kinds of silly things, but at least I know that in the liturgy I've said some true things out loud."

From Edward, on the journey "My son received the Sacrament of Confirmation Sunday. When I joined this network two years ago, I wouldn't have thought this was possible. God is so good. I can't believe he is entering the Church before me, but I'm happy to hold the door open for him. It's amazing how God has been working on people close to me and my wife. My wife, who was pretty upset about my desire to become Catholic two years ago, is now praying the Rosary with a couple of the women at the Anglican church that we used to attend. And she is even making rosaries for our local Catholic church to send overseas to children. I know there are many people on this site who have spouses and families that are making it impossible to enter the Church. I truly believe you are very precious to God. Don't give up. I would like to thank you lovely people who work for the Coming Home Network, especially David Emery, Susan Dansand, Ken Hensley, Howard Hampson, Brother Rex Anthony Norris, and many more. You welcomed me when I needed help. God bless you, and thank you for all you do."

From Karen, on the journey "I am delighted to report that I have the sweetest, most godly saint of a sponsor, and she is a fantastic mentor. We are doing things together outside of class, so I am growing in my faith and understanding through her as well as through continued readings and class. I love everything. I grow in understanding and receive divine inspiration every single day. I only wish I could live another whole entire lifetime as a Catholic, but some of us are late bloomers. God's timing is perfect, that being said. So, again, another grace occurred when my Protestant husband agreed to talk to the priest who adjudicates annulments, and after that he agreed to pursue an annulment with his ex-wife. All the paperwork for me to be cleared to be confirmed has been submitted for a while now. Hopefully, we will receive good news soon. Either way, however, I am already a Catholic at heart, and I know the Lord has engineered all of it, and so, I trust in Him. God bless you, and thanks for what you are doing in this ministry." ■

Prayer List

Clergy

■ **For Matthew and Rachel, former pastors** who have just been received into the Church, that the Lord would lead them as they begin to grow as Catholics and attempt to discover His will for them.

■ **For Brian, a Methodist pastor** who is convinced he must become Catholic and is wondering how he will support his family if he does.

■ **For Bret, a Baptist pastor** who has begun examining the teachings of the Catholic Church and attending Mass and who is struggling to reconcile his Protestant background, understanding, and ministry with what he is now coming to understand.

■ **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 show her the truth and beauty of Catholicism.

■ **For Jeffrey, an Anglican minister** who has been attracted to the Catholic Church for a long time but has personal issues that would make becoming Catholic very difficult, that the Lord would make a way for him and his wife to enter the Church.

■ **For Justin, an evangelical pastor** who has been watching shows on CHNetwork every week and is on the road toward 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 Donald, a Presbyterian pastor** hoping 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 W. and his wife** who are on the path toward 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.

Laity

■ **For Andrea, a former Lutheran and agnostic**, that her journey through RCIA may be one of spiritual maturation and joy.

■ **For Robert, a Unitarian Universalist**, that, through the grace of Our Lord Jesus, the Holy Spirit may bring him to God the Father in Christ's holy Church.

■ **For Katherine, a Methodist**, that she may discover a foundation of spiritual strength and peace through the sacraments of Jesus's holy Church.

■ **For Noah in California**, that, as he continues to discover the ancient and sure teachings of the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church, Our Lord Jesus would grant a hunger in him for the holy Eucharist.

■ **For Andrew, an Anabaptist**, that his love for the Discalced Carmelites may bring him home to the Catholic Church.

■ **For a Lutheran in Michigan**, that she may discover and embrace the clear truths of the Catholic Faith through the grace of Our Lord Jesus.



■ **For Joshua, a Pentecostal**, that he and his wife may continue to discover the truths of Our Lord Jesus and His holy Church.

■ **For Cherri, a Methodist**, that, as she turns to Our Lord Jesus Christ, making Him the center of her life, she may be guided to the fullness of Catholic truth.

■ **For Roger in New Zealand**, that his wife may be given a spiritual hunger for the truth and begin to explore the Catholic Faith with an open mind and heart.

■ **For Leslie, a Mennonite**, that her many questions and concerns about the teachings of the Catholic Church would, through the grace of Jesus, be guided to clarity, understanding, and fulfillment.

■ **For Graham, a Southern Baptist**, that, as he continues to pray the holy Rosary, the intercession of the Blessed Virgin would bring him into full communion with the Church of her Son.

■ **For an Anglican in Colorado**, that his basic Protestant beliefs that draw him away from the Catholic Church may be overcome through the grace of Our Lord Jesus.

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 3

wanted to write about Lewis’s spiritual mentoring in his letters. I had read through two volumes of the collected letters of C.S. Lewis that had been edited by Walter Hooper, Lewis’s secretary in the summer of 1963. Walter had labored for many years to bring Lewis’s unpublished works into print. This editing was a huge labor of love. I anxiously awaited the arrival of volume three of that opus, and finally, it arrived. I was amazed at the size of that final volume, well over 1,000 pages. The letters were annotated with brief biographies of the writers and even included some commentary on the background of many letters. In my admiration of this awesome tome, I decided to write a letter of thanks to Mr. Hooper.

Using my librarian skills, I managed to find his home address. I wrote him, basically, a fan letter, thanking him for the immense work he had done.

I never expected a reply from him. Why would he waste his time replying to some unknown guy in Kansas? To my surprise, several weeks later, a letter from Walter appeared in my mailbox. It was a two-page, single-spaced missive thanking me for my letter and telling me some interesting facts about the project.

What caught my eye would change my life forever. You see, Walter had sent along his e-mail address. Was this an invitation to write to him? I took it that way... and thus began a correspondence that would continue until his passing in December of 2020.

In the summer of 2008, I returned to Oxford, and Walter invited me to his home for tea. We had discussed my spiritual journey in our correspondence. But when I arrived at his home, within a few minutes, he asked me how my journey to the Catholic Church was going. Walter himself had become a Catholic in 1988. No one had asked me this question as of yet, and it took me by surprise. Before I could really think it through, I found myself saying, “I think it’s more a question of when and not if.” That was all Walter needed.

Our visit quickly moved into a mentorship that continued through our regular correspondence. Walter became a steady hand in guiding my thinking and gently pushing me towards the path I needed to follow. He also put me in contact with his parish priest, who would answer my questions and give me perspectives that otherwise would not have occurred to me. Walter coming into my life in this way was completely unexpected. On his part, it was overwhelmingly gracious and loving.

The next two years were a blur. One by one, my objections to Catholicism began to fall, and I got ever closer to entering the Church. In the process, I had to let go of many biases. I had my list of things that I was sure the Catholic Church heretically

taught (worship of Mary, justification by works, etc.), but just when I thought I had caught the Church in its errors, I realized that I was the one in error. The Church didn’t teach the things I thought she did. Instead, a sacramental approach to life, transubstantiation, veneration of the saints, and the Blessed Mother all made sense. The more I studied Church history and the Church Fathers, the more all the pieces came together. The more Catholic writers I read, the more I wanted to read. It was as if I had discovered a huge hole in my soul, and Catholicism was filling it and enchanting me in unimaginable ways. Along the way, Walter’s steady encouragement and friendship

were just what I needed, moving me ever closer. But there was one chapter left to go. I had read tons of books, but still I hesitated. What was the problem? Why couldn’t I take that last step?

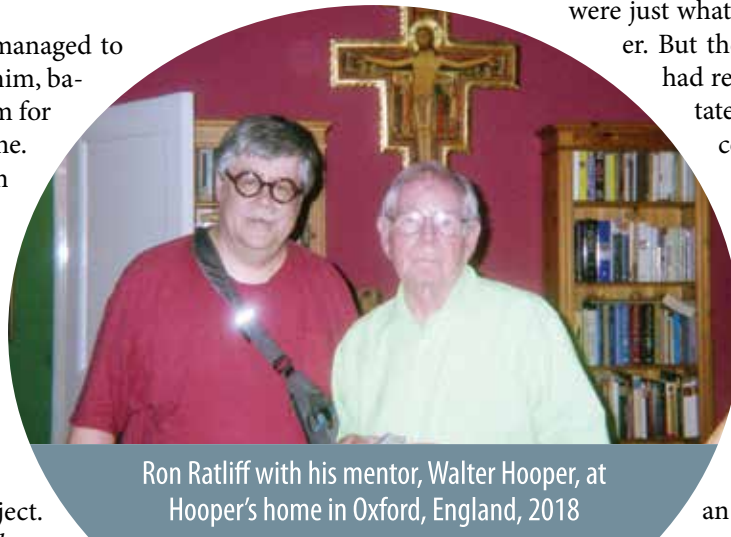
Part of the problem was a growing realization that, if I became a Catholic, there would be consequences. I had friends and family who would not react favorably. Moreover, I wasn’t sure how my employer, a Protestant Christian college, would react.

Again, just at the right time, an English Catholic came to my rescue... in the person of (now Saint)

John Henry Newman. I had read some of Newman, but now I came across *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*. I dove into this book, and it drove the final nail into my Protestant coffin. In just the introduction, Newman blew away the last vestiges of my Protestant world. This quote hit me like a sledgehammer: “And this one thing at least is certain; whatever history teaches, whatever it omits, whatever it exaggerates or extenuates, whatever it says and unsays, at least the Christianity of history is not Protestantism. If ever there were a safe truth, it is this” (Newman 1989, 7). Then, a little further along, there was this gem: “To be deep in history is to cease to be a Protestant” (Newman 1989, 8).

Newman helped me to recognize a major blind spot in my life. Having been trained in an evangelical seminary and having been an evangelical Protestant, I had always seen myself as the final arbitrator of what was true. While I had rejected the Catholic pope, I now realized I had been my own pope my whole life. Newman helped me to see that I could not make the move to become a Catholic until I surrendered myself to the Church and her teachings.

At long last, the chase was over. In the fall of 2010, my friend, Baptist youth pastor Vaughn Kohler, and I began private instruction. We were received into the Catholic Church at the 2011 Easter Vigil. I took Newman as my patron saint. At one point, I asked Walter if I could be received into the



Ron Ratliff with his mentor, Walter Hooper, at Hooper’s home in Oxford, England, 2018

...Journeys Home Continued...

Church in Oxford because I wanted him to be my sponsor. Wisely, Walter told me I needed to “bloom where I was planted,” even though he would have loved nothing better than to have filled that role. In the summer of 2011, I returned to Oxford and received the Eucharist with Walter in his parish. It was the next best thing.

Unfortunately, my life took a sharp, difficult turn a year later, perpetrating a painful divorce. I maintain that my becoming a Catholic helped to prepare me for what was ahead. The Church's support and care meant the world to me as all that I had learned about offering up our pain became a personal reality.

Looking back, I marvel that I was able to make such a long journey and overcome my strong anti-Catholic feelings. I marvel even more that my love of C.S. Lewis could have led me to a friend of his, someone who would help mentor me home. Only

God can arrange such incredible circumstances. Thank you, Lord, and thank you, Walter. ■



RON RATLIFF entered the Catholic Church at the Easter Vigil in 2011. He has a bachelor's degree in English, a Master of Theology degree from Dallas Theological Seminary, and a Master of Library Science. Ron is a member of St. Isidore's Catholic Student Center in Manhattan, Kansas and is part of a team that creates and produces content for St. Isidore's website, Konza Catholic (konzacatholic.com).

Continue the **JOURNEY**

Please visit CHNetwork.org/converts to comment on and share this or one of hundreds of other powerful testimonies!

Dear Mr. Hooper... From, the Pepper King!

In 2006 Ron Ratliff wrote a fan letter to C.S. Lewis's secretary, Walter Hooper. What transpired was an unexpected reply from Hooper (who lived in England), and the two struck up a much-treasured, providential friendship through their regular email correspondence over the course of 14 years. Ron even became acquainted with Walter's cat, Blessed Lucy, and Walter affectionately referred to Ron as “The Pepper King” – in gratitude for the gift of 2 ground-pepper shakers that Ron sent Walter every month. Walter grew to become Ron's mentor, offering Ron sage and witty advice, as well as uplifting, yet firm, encouragement as Ron made his difficult journey into the Catholic Church. While their friendship, sadly, ended with Hooper's death in 2020, Ron saved the majority of their emails. Below are some never-before-seen excerpts from their personal correspondence.

► **December 15, 2009** | Dear Ron,

I've just refilled my McCormick pepper shaker... and I decided that before I dare shake a flake of pepper onto anything, I must thank you for what seems your supernatural kindness.... I know it must be very complicated for you to convert to the Catholic Church when so many things weigh on you. But you have not only my prayers — but the far greater prayers of the SAINTS. They will make it possible for you. And never are the Saints more active than at Christmas. So — watch out! — you may become a Catholic sooner than you expect.

Happy Christmas,
Walter

► **January 28, 2010** | Hi Walter,

I know your prayers have been working on me. I spent most of last week pondering why, after all the years of thinking and months of preparing, I would back out [of RCIA] at the last minute. I tried to think through what had caused me to hiccup at the last minute.... I think I know what was bothering me, and I want to see what you think. Coming into the Catholic Church will be one of the great events of my life. I know it's going to change things in my life, and I will, in

many ways, be a different person (in all the right ways).... Lewis and my trips to England have figured largely in this. Getting to know you has also been such an important step, as you've been like a mentor to me. I want my being received into the Church to be special. Honestly, I don't feel that... it is going to be special.... So, here goes. What I would like, more than anything, is to be received into the Church in Oxford and you to be my Godfather.... I can't think of anything more wonderful than becoming a Catholic in the city that gave us [Saint John Henry] Newman and many others.

My best to Blessed Lucy and to you, as always,
Ron

► **January 28, 2010 (later that day)** | Dear Ron,

You've been much on my mind, and I've thought long about your attempt to become Catholic. This evening I told Fr. Daniel about the difference between what you are offered — the boring RCIA program in your parish — and what you'd like — to be received in Oxford. As for the RCIA program... I expect Fr. Daniel calls it 'Roman Catholics in Agony.' Anyway, if you must go through with it, his advice is to 'offer it up.' I'd [also] been coming to the conclusion that it's good to begin by showing some of that humility [that] the great

G.K. Chesterton showed when he was preparing to be received – he chose to begin with the Penny Catechism.... You'd like to begin, as you say, in Newman's Oxford, with me as your Godfather... but... I don't think you'll like hearing this, but I think it is good to begin lowly. Remember Chesterton saying, 'We are taller when we bow.' The people you would be sharing the RCIA program with... would be – wherever you are received – your fellow Catholics, the ones you will spend a great deal of your life with. Have you read Newman's novel, *Loss and Gain*? One of my favorite passages in literature is... when Charles, the young convert, goes to a Catholic Mass for the first time and finds himself with the Universal Church – people from every walk of life, high and low, rich and poor. And he rejoices in finding it that way.... Now here comes the DESSERT. When you come through [RCIA] with humility – you emerge as a Catholic entitled to the enormous privileges that come with it.... What an enormous amount of 'real estate' [one] inherits when [one] becomes Catholic. You may receive the Body of Christ in no end of wonderful Catholic Churches throughout the world.... You might receive the Sacrament from the Pope himself. Surely it is worth being like Chesterton, and even greater Catholics, who chose to 'become taller when they bow[ed].' So... simply become a Catholic. Then you can have all the beauty and pomp you like. But not before. God bless you.

Your friend,
Walter

► **August 26, 2010** | Hi Walter,

A lot has been happening.... I am looking forward to the RCIA classes and will go through them gladly. Fr. Z. ... thought it would be more beneficial to me and my friend Vaughn to receive private instruction... because the church has never had theologically-trained Protestants apply for RCIA. The church sees this as an opportunity for a give and take with us that they've never had. Vaughn and I are in dire need of the training... as we are trained as Protestants but need to learn to think like Catholics, which we don't always do.... Vaughn and I are chomping at the bit to get started.... I certainly never expected this, but it is the will of the leadership, and I'm fine with it.... After almost a decade, I am finally heading Home....

Ron

► **August 29, 2010** | Dear Ron,

Splendid! I'm thrilled to hear you'll receive private instructions.... Remember Our Lord saying that His followers would be mocked? Get used to it. I believe it can be turned into a blessing — for if they mocked, and eventually crucified, Christ — why should we expect to fare any better? But remember, you will be one of an immensely large family.... You will make a marvelous Catholic because you will find that, instead of trying to save the Church, this Church will save you! I've been a Catholic for 22 years, and I cannot think of it without rejoicing. The same will happen to you. You will have finally come HOME, and the anxieties of recent years will simply drop away. However your friends react to Catholicism – you can take it. Remember that in many cases [their objections are]... mainly a matter of sheer ignorance. Don't take it too seriously. Do what you have to do. If one waited until all one's friends were happy about your becoming a Catholic, you'd never do anything.... Remember, too — becoming a Catholic is to you an informed decision, made over years of praying and learning. Your objectors have

probably not spent 5 minutes considering their objections.... Please let me know when you'll be received so that your friends in Oxford can be praying for you.

All the very best,
Walter

► **September 28, 2010** | Hi Walter,

Tonight is the third session of my class, and it's going very well. Vaughn and I are really enjoying our sessions. Our teacher has a deep love of the Catholic Church and keeps us on our toes firing questions at us. In response, Vaughn and I ask a lot of questions. We are going bit by bit through the Mass after being shown how and why the Church is set up as it is.... I see now how much my free-church Protestant years kept me in the dark. Yes, I've been asking myself what took me so long to do this!!

God bless,
Ron

► **October 2, 2010** | Dear Ron,

... I'm thrilled your instructions are going so well.... You will be forever glad you crossed the Tiber when you did... because you will be entering what [Saint] John Henry Newman called 'the one true fold of the Redeemer.'

All good wishes from,
Walter & Blessed Lucy of Narnia

► **January 1, 2011** | Hi Walter,

.... I am curious to know if Lewis and Chesterton ever met?.... I have thought what a great meeting that would have been!

God bless,
Ron

► **January 9, 2011** | Dear Ron,

No, Lewis and Chesterton never met. I think it had entirely to do with Chesterton's immense fame. Lewis... did not like to bother people he imagined to be very, very busy.... It's a pity that [they] didn't meet, but by this time it might have been almost impossible for Chesterton to make any new friends. This happens.... Lewis... enjoyed all friendships, old and new... [but] he was in some ways a shy man, and he was certainly too shy to introduce himself to Chesterton.... Did I say how thrilled I was [that] your wife is becoming a Catholic? This way, both of you can be entirely honest about how much Catholicism counts in your lives. It's a sad thing to lie about the Most Important Thing in Your Life to the one You Love the Most. I'm so glad you and your wife are not setting up 'conditions' with the Almighty, but accepting the wonderful Catholic Church which Jesus gave us at the beginning of His ministry....

Yours ever,
Walter

► **April 25, 2011 (Right after the Easter Vigil)** | Dear Ron,

Congratulations! And I really do mean it, for you and Jeannie have done your souls a power of good. I'm sorry Jeannie's foster father is unhappy, but as you're rich, and he's poor, you can afford to be affable and generous. If your Catholic life is anything like mine, you've started on what may be called, in the words of Richard Halliburton, 'The Royal Road to Romance.' In other words, Catholicism is not only the most exciting thing on earth — but TRUE!

Walter ■

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