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THE COMING HOME NETWORK INTERNATIONAL

Journeys Home

Called by Beauty, Formed by Grace: A Journey to Catholicism

Fr. Matthew Hawkins

God drew me to Himself through beauty and mystery. From childhood, I was surrounded by subtle signals of the transcendent—crucifixes on school walls, rituals in international films, and the gentle rhythm of liturgical life. These were not just aesthetic or cultural curiosities; they were signs. In daily life, there are many signals that draw us toward the sacred, inviting us to look again, listen more closely, and open our hearts to God.



Early Signs and Signals

My path to Catholicism and ultimately to the priesthood was shaped by both a diverse cultural background and a lifelong spiritual restlessness. I was raised in the African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E.)

Church. My father, an A.M.E. minister, and my mother, raised in the Black Baptist tradition, formed my earliest exposure to Christian faith. Yet even in those early years, my environment was strikingly ecumenical: I attended a Unitarian nursery school, a Jewish summer camp, a Catholic elementary school, and our family frequently visited a Presbyterian church. As a teenager, I tutored younger children in an Episcopalian church, and I attended a Quaker boarding school in high school. My first job, besides flipping burgers in high school, was with a Lutheran

church for outreach ministry. By the time I entered adulthood, I had experienced many Christian traditions—yet none had fully claimed me.

From a young age, despite what I heard adults say about how Catholics were not deeply spiritual but only believed in following rules, I sensed a profound depth to Catholic spirituality. For one thing, I knew that they attended church every week. In fact, they had an obligation to do so, whereas for us Protestants, it was optional. Many of my parents' friends, however, said that this was not a sign of devotion on the part of Catholics, but rather them just "going through the motions." However, I remember being captivated by the images in Catholic schools—Christ crucified, and Saints suffering with their eyes wide open. I was particularly fascinated by the image of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, surrounded by a crown of thorns and afame with passion for our salvation. I watched foreign films, and I noticed Catholic children

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...Journeys Home Continued...

making the sign of the cross before meals. This struck me as being a very spiritual gesture, an acknowledgement that we are not only flesh, but also souls. It struck me that within our mortal bodies we encounter immortality.

When I was in fifth grade, and my older brother was attending a Catholic junior high school, I read his textbook for faith formation class and religious education. What struck me wasn't just the doctrine it presented, but its emphasis on the importance of having an encounter with Christ. The book gave examples of how we, as children, could bring Christ's presence into daily life—on the playground, at home, and in the classroom. This was an embodied faith, not just a list of rules, doctrines, or moralisms. It was a faith to be lived and understood, allowing room for mystery.

Television also played a large role in forming my impressions about the Catholic Church. Like many Protestants of my generation, the deepest impressions that were made on me about what it meant to be Catholic came through the highly televised lives of the first Catholic president and his family. The news that priests had administered "the last rites" to John F. Kennedy when he was dying in Dallas introduced us to the sacraments of the Catholic Church, which are mysteries to us Protestants. Something similar was true of Catholic forms of prayer. The image of Senator Robert F. Kennedy clutching rosary beads as he lay dying on the kitchen floor of the Ambassador Hotel introduced me to a prayer of beads and repetition that was at once beautiful. Suddenly, what had once seemed so distant and alien to us became accessible.

For many of us, the practical meaning and application of Catholic thought and teachings to our daily lives were given depth during broadcasts of Bishop Fulton Sheen. Similarly, we were enthralled by coverage of the Second Vatican Council and the grandfatherly image of Pope John XXIII. It became clear to me that the Catholic Church had a civilizing effect on our culture and touched the very depths of our humanity.

By the time I attended Catholic elementary school in the sixth grade, in 1968, I saw the Church as a civilizing force in the city, holding a society together that was at risk of being torn apart by narcissism, hedonism, and violence. While the secular culture promoted the idea that everything pointed toward the greatness of Man, and that Man was "the measure of all meaning," the spires of the Cathedral, where we attended Mass, pointed beyond the transitory world to infuse our lives with beauty, goodness, and Truth. Conversely, while the secular world saw the future as being bleak and growth of humanity as a type of predatory virus on the earth, the Catholic Church espoused the dignity of every human person from conception until natural death and had families that were large, welcoming, and gracious. It seemed to me that Catholic families celebrated life while others trembled fearfully embracing a culture of death.

Spiritual Wandering and Return

Nonetheless, as a teenager, I drifted away from Christianity. The elders in the Protestant church I attended discouraged intellectual curiosity and ridiculed questions coming from a precocious teenager that they were unable to answer. I began to see Christianity as being all about conformity and "good behavior." What I saw in Christianity touched neither my mind nor my soul. Its emphasis was entirely on faith with no room for reason. It offered me simple, one-dimensional "answers" without an invitation to enter into the mystery. I couldn't imagine how it might be relevant to my life.

It was not until I went to college that I began to take a second look at Christianity and see it as being potentially relevant once again. My girlfriend was a member of a student group of evangelical Christians, and they were at least willing to raise questions about the contemporary world, even if they were unwilling to explore those questions deeply. They challenged the campus culture of weekend binges and casual sex, promoting instead the "old-fashioned" idea of commitment to

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

TO KNOW CHRIST JESUS

FRANK SHEED



In this classic work, Frank Sheed (1897-1981) shares how the central concern of the Gospels is to help us come to know Christ as he actually lived among us, and interacted with all the various people he encountered from his infancy to his passion and death.

#3192 - \$17.95 **\$12.56 Limited stock**

BIBLICAL ROOTS OF THE MASS

THOMAS NASH



Veteran Catholic apologist Tom Nash shares how the story of the Mass goes deeper than the Last Supper and Christ's Passion and Death. Indeed, it's part of an unbroken story that begins in the Garden of Eden and continues today in your local parish.

#3196 - \$19.95 **\$13.96 Limited stock**

FIRE WITHIN

FR. THOMAS DUBAY



Fr. Dubay's book is the fruit of many years of his experience in spiritual direction. In it, he synthesizes the teachings of two great doctors of the Church (St. John of the Cross and St. Teresa of Avila) and the teaching of Sacred Scripture on Christian prayer.

#3171 - \$19.95 **\$13.96 Limited stock**

...Journeys Home Continued...

the sacramental covenant of marriage. Above all, they introduced me to an aspect of Christianity that hadn't been a part of my upbringing. While the church I grew up in emphasized good behavior and racial equality, these Evangelicals emphasized surrendering one's life to Christ and walking in the Holy Spirit. This seemed to take the notion of "faith" to a deeper level.

1978 was "the year of the three popes:" Paul VI, John Paul I, and John Paul II. It was also the year I entered full communion with the Catholic Church. The evangelicals had reawakened my curiosity about Christianity, but what they offered me seemed incomplete. I knew from my formative years in the A.M.E. Church and Catholic elementary school that there was more to Christianity than a naive literalist interpretation of the Bible, proof-texting, and street-corner evangelization offered. I decided to visit every church that I had been affiliated with in my childhood to find out what was missing in my new forms of Christian experience. Every Sunday, I visited a different church. One Sunday, I went to a Methodist church, the next Sunday it was a Baptist church, the next Sunday it was a Presbyterian church, until I finally wound up in a Catholic church.

The Catholic church I visited was an architecturally modern building. The name of the parish was Immaculate Conception. I hesitated before entering the church because I knew, from my elementary school days, that there were rituals that one must observe, but I wasn't sure I could remember what all of them were, and I didn't want to embarrass myself. I knew enough not to try to receive communion because I wasn't Catholic. I followed the example of the parishioners and genuflected, bending one knee to the ground, when entering and leaving the pew, which I felt was a profoundly ennobling gesture, although I had not yet learned the gesture was directed toward Jesus in the tabernacle, the housing for the Eucharist located behind the altar. I watched the parishioners and learned to stand when they stood, sit when they sat, and kneel when they knelt.

The Mass I attended was a folk Mass, a style of Catholic liturgy that emerged in the 1960s and 1970s, following the Second Vatican Council. It sought to make the Mass more accessible and relevant by incorporating the musical idioms of contemporary folk and popular music into worship. This was quietly inspiring in ways that caught me off guard. The strum of acoustic guitars created a warm, intimate atmosphere, while the untrained voices of students rose and fell with an unpolished authenticity. Their harmonies weren't perfect; voices cracked slightly on high notes, some students sang a beat behind, but this very imperfection reminded me that holiness breaks through the ordinary with a surprising, almost startling simplicity.

The liturgy itself felt humble, almost fragile, yet it somehow carried the full weight of centuries, of eternity pressing into that small space. Unlike the forceful and emotive sermons I was used to, the power of this liturgy came through gesture and symbols, the liturgical color of the vestments, the reverent elevation of the host. There was something profound in

watching college students in worn jeans and sneakers participate in rituals older than the stones beneath their feet. The priest's voice was conversational rather than commanding, the bread broken with gentle hands. Yet in that stripped-down vulnerability, the mystery felt accessible and profound. It felt like a bridge between heaven and earth, the sacred and the secular, as if Christ Himself sanctified the everyday. The barriers between the human and the holy were cleared away. It was at once down-to-earth and quietly, powerfully elevating. I felt as though I belonged.

The weeks that followed only deepened this sense of encounter. I found myself returning not out of obligation or even curiosity, but drawn by something I couldn't name. Each time I knelt before the altar, the same quiet transformation seemed to occur, not dramatic or overwhelming, but steady and real, like watching dawn break slowly over a familiar landscape. If I had to receive religious instruction so that I could participate in the sacrament, the bread placed on my tongue carried weight beyond its physical substance. This presence lingered long after the taste had faded. I began to notice how the other communicants approached with a reverence that seemed to acknowledge something actually there, not just remembered or symbolized. Their faces held the same mixture of humility and anticipation I felt rising inside of me.

What struck me most was how this presence extended beyond the ritual itself, threading through ordinary moments in the days between services. The memory of that broken bread would surface while I was washing clothes or walking across campus, carrying with it the same sense of sanctuary I'd felt in that small church. It was as if receiving communion had opened a door that had been slightly ajar, allowing glimpses of the sacred to filter into the mundane. The theological arguments I'd once found so abstract—transubstantiation, Real Presence, the mystery of the Incarnation—began to feel less like doctrines to be understood and more like inadequate attempts to describe an experience that defied complete explanation. I was beginning to understand that belief in the Real Presence wasn't primarily an intellectual position but a response to repeated encounter with something or Someone unmistakably present.

Wrestling with Doubts

This feeling of belonging, however, was not to go unchallenged. First, I would have to wrestle with significant theological and racial concerns. Protestant evangelicals warned that Catholics "prayed to statues," had "changed the Bible," and lacked authentic spirituality while Blacks accused the Catholic Church of being "white" and "Eurocentric." These questions raised doubts. Were Catholics really Christians after all? If they worshipped Jesus Christ, why did they have so many devotions to the saints and Mary? Was Catholicism truly inclusive or simply a Eurocentric structure that only tolerated non-white presence without embracing it? Was it possible to be a Black American and fully Catholic? The answers to these questions came grudgingly.

As I began to attend Mass on a regular basis, parishioners took the time to explain the sacraments, the liturgy, and Church



Confession and Penance: A Small Act of Love



Over the past few months I have been preparing my daughter, Philomena, to make her first Confession. My wife and I have been helping her memorize the Act of Contrition, practice an Examination of Conscience, rehearse the sacrament step by step, and visit the church on Saturdays to watch her siblings line up, enter the confessional, and say 'sorry' to God.

Recently, we were watching a video together about Confession, and we reached the step of the process when the priest assigns a 'penance'. "What is penance?" the video asked. "It is a small act of love". This simple but profound description was helpful in explaining the concept of "penance" to my eight year old. As I have continued to reflect upon it, I have come to appreciate how the definition—"a small act of love"—cuts to the heart of what the Sacrament of Reconciliation—and penance as a part of it—truly are.

Many members of the Coming Home Network are learning about the Sacrament of Reconciliation in OCIA as they prepare to enter into full communion with the Church this Easter. Part of the catechesis on confession concerns the three acts on the part of the penitent: **contrition** (being sorry for your sins), **confession** (telling them to the priest who is acting *in persona Christi*), and **satisfaction**, also called simply "penance" which is a "small act of love" to be performed after you leave the confessional.

Catholics, both cradle and converts alike, will sometimes poke fun at "light penances" given in the sacrament. After a grueling session, pouring out one's heart and sharing one's most embarrassing sins, most of the time, the priest will say something like "For your penance, Pray one Our Father and one Hail Mary." What? That's it? This prescribed small act of love often offends our sensibilities. "I got off way too easy!" we might think. But the smallness is a feature, not a bug.

While we might recognize intellectually that the forgiveness we receive in confession is something totally undeserved, still there is perhaps a part in each of our prodigal hearts that wants to try to earn back our Father's love through effort. In his apostolic exhortation, Reconciliation and Penance, Saint Pope John Paul II drew attention precisely to the nature and purpose of the "Satisfaction" or "Penance" assigned in the confessional. He writes:

What is the meaning of this satisfaction that one makes or the penance that one performs? Certainly it is not a price that one pays for the sin absolved and for the forgiveness obtained: No human price can match what is obtained, which is the fruit of Christ's precious blood.

The forgiveness we receive in confession is of infinite value. The point of penance after confession is not to somehow try to "earn" the forgiveness we just received or to somehow "square the

books" with God. What, then, is the point of penance? The catechism explains:

But sin also injures and weakens the sinner himself, as well as his relationships with God and neighbor. Absolution takes away sin, but it does not remedy all the disorders sin has caused. Raised up from sin, the sinner must still recover his full spiritual health by doing something more to make amends for the sin: he must "make satisfaction for" or "expiate" his sins. This satisfaction is also called "penance." (CCC, 1459)

Rather than being an attempt at repayment or self-justification, penance is the medicine, prescribed by the Church through the priest, through which the penitent is invited to cooperate with God's grace and freely involve himself in the necessary healing process.

This brings us back to penance being a "small act of love". Whatever form the penance might take—the catechism mentions "prayer, an offering, works of mercy, service of neighbor, voluntary self-denial, sacrifices, and above all the patient acceptance of the cross we must bear" (CCC 1460)—it must be a fully free and personal act of charity that primes your heart for more. God's goal is not just for you to "not sin" but to learn and grow, by His grace, to love as He loves, and this takes your willing cooperation and practice. You are rehearsing a new pattern, not just with your words or external action, but with the very dispositions of your heart.

But this brings us back to the question of the "smallness" of penance. For many years, when I would hear saints such as St. Therese of Lisieux talk about doing "little things with great love", or when Our Lord invokes 'smallness' in parables like the widow's mite or mustard seed, etc—I would receive such notions with a haughty attitude of "Well, perhaps start small if necessary—but bigger is better!" What I have come to realize over time, through the humbling experiences of my own sinfulness, is that I have it all wrong. I must do little things with great love because the little things are the only things I am capable of doing out of love. Why? Most of what I do, most of the time—even the ostensibly "good" things I do—I do from a heart that is impure. There is love for God and neighbor in there somewhere, but it is mixed in with pride, fear, selfish desire—a whole cadre of other motives and reasons for doing the things I do. How do I know this? Because as soon as the pressure is off, when no one is watching, when there is no immediate gratification to be had or penalty to be faced—how quickly do I fall back into my old ways.

The beauty of small things—humble things, hidden things—is that they give us the opportunity to do them simply, purely out of love. I think perhaps it is these little opportunities—the impossibly small acts of love, should we choose to accept them—that can really break our hearts of stone and make way for the

hearts of flesh God wishes to give us.

As we continue the journey this year and enter into the lenten season—a special season of "penance" in preparation for Easter—let us humbly embrace the sacrament of confession and joyfully rededicate ourselves to the small acts of love that, by God's grace, bring healing to our hearts and make us more like our Savior.

In Christ,



JonMarc Grodi

Executive Director of the CHNetwork
Host of EWTN's *The Journey Home Program*

**"Yet even now," says the Lord,
"return to me with all your heart,
with fasting, with weeping, and with
mourning; and rend your hearts and
not your garments." Return to the
Lord, your God, for he is gracious
and merciful, slow to anger, and
abounding in steadfast love, and
repents of evil.**

JOEL 2: 12-13

Joyful Journey Updates

Marcia T., former Non-Denominational Evangelical

On the first anniversary of my confirmation, it's hard to believe it has been a whole year since I came into full communion with the Catholic Church. This last year has begun to shift my understanding of what it means to walk with God from black and white to color: learning more and living life in the sacramental economy is like a treasure trove of "aha!" moments! I feel like I've reached the saddle of a mountain, able to look back and see the difficult trail I've

already navigated right in the middle of a beautiful view, and ahead to more trail and more beauty as I continue upwards. Like C.S. Lewis has Aslan saying in The Last Battle, "Further up and further in!"

I'm incredibly grateful for your willingness to pray and come alongside me last year, amid so much drama. Your wisdom and willingness to listen to my story made a big difference for the series of decisions I needed to make then. Such a juxtaposition of joy and sadness...and I would do it all again in a heartbeat. Thank you—so much. Blessings to you today. ■

Do you have a journey update to share? Submit it to info@chnetwork.org

EWTN'S THE JOURNEY HOME on television & radio, hosted by JonMarc Grodi, CHNetwork Executive Director

Monday, Feb 2

Vijaya Bodach

*Former Methodist and
Agnostic*

Monday, Feb 9

Gary Morgan

*Former Cowboy
Church Pastor*

Monday, Feb 16

Grant Adams

*Former Evangelical
Youth Minister*

Monday, Feb 23

Jeff and Lois

Heron

*Former Wesleyan
Ministers*

Monday, Mar 2

Roger Maxson

Former Baptist Pastor

TELEVISION

Mon. 8PM ET—Encores: Tues. 1AM ET, Thurs. 2PM ET
The Best of The Journey Home: Sat. 6PM ET

RADIO

Mon. 8PM ET
Encores: Sat. 7AM ET, Sun. 1AM ET and 5PM ET
The Best of The Journey Home: Mon.–Fri. 1AM ET



Christianity and Islam

By Reza Akhtar, Convert from Islam

This is an excerpt from a longer article which can be found on our website at chnetwork.org/revelation

Islam and Christianity both claim to be rooted in God's revelation to mankind. While there are certainly similarities in how these two religions understand revelation, there are also significant differences. This article is neither an apology for the Christian position nor an attack on the Muslim one. It is simply an exposition of the differences, aimed primarily (but not exclusively) at readers familiar with Islam but perhaps not with Christianity.

God Revealing Himself

Both Christianity and Islam view revelation as a means by which God interacts with humans and reveals something of his nature to them. To be sure, neither makes the claim that revelation makes it possible for people to understand *everything* about God. Nonetheless, both assert that in revealing to humans something about himself—and also who they are in relation to him—God makes it possible for them to be in a relationship with him. The two religions are in agreement that God *calls* all people to be in right relationship with him.

Progressive vs. repetitive revelation

Divine revelation, as understood by Christianity, is progressive: through narratives taking place over the course of several thousand years, God gradually reveals more and more of himself. In doing so, he gradually gathers together a people, whom he unites to himself through a series of covenants, with the ultimate goal of including all humanity in an everlasting covenant. Thus, he begins the process by revealing himself to Abraham and his family, then to the Jews (the descendants of Jacob), and finally—in the person of Jesus Christ—to all mankind. Islam, in contrast, teaches that God sent every nation a messenger instructing them to turn away from idolatry and serve him (Quran 16:36), but in each instance except the last, the message was either lost or corrupted. Muslims believe that the Quran is God's direct revelation and his final communication to mankind, although it is essentially a reiteration of the same message sent earlier.

What does this distinction tell us about differences in how these two religions understand divine revelation? One observation is that Christianity views God's self-revelation as inextricably bound up with human history. Certain events are not only episodes of human history but also vehicles used by God to communicate something about himself in relation to us. Such an understanding is not completely absent from Islam, but its scope is much narrower. Individual events might

be understood as manifestations of God's power or his providence, but there is nothing in particular that links them together. Thus, the divine economy, the plan of God as it unfolds in human history, figures much more prominently in Christianity than in Islam.

Revelation in a Person

The Muslim belief that the Quran is God's direct revelation to mankind is in some sense analogous to the Christian belief in Jesus Christ as the Word of God. Muslims believe that in the Quran, God himself spoke to mankind, just as Christians believe God spoke to us in the person of Christ. Both religions present God as using something created, something finite, as a matrix for communicating with people: for Christianity, this is the human nature of Christ; for Islam, it is the Arabic language. The key difference is that the Muslim model is unidirectional, while the Christian one is bidirectional. Muslims believe that God speaks to people in the Quran, but they cannot use it to respond to him. Phrased differently, the Quran does not mediate a relationship between man and God. (I am not saying that Muslims do not or cannot enjoy a relationship with God, simply that the Quran is not the medium through which this happens.) Christians, however, believe that the fullness of revelation to mankind came in the *person* of Jesus Christ. One person *can* respond to another, and so it is possible for people to enjoy a relationship with God through Jesus Christ. Nonetheless, there are (at least) two objections a non-Christian might make to my last sentence; I will explore these separately.

The first objection from someone with a limited knowledge of Christianity runs along the lines of: "I thought you guys claim that Jesus Christ *is* God. How can you talk about a relationship with God through him? That implies that he's distinct from God, so you're showing that you're actually polytheists." This is a complex objection requiring a complex response. The short answer involves recalling that Christians believe that God is a Trinity of persons, yet a single entity (or nature). Relationships exist between persons, and the person of Jesus Christ—who is the same as the person of the Son before the Incarnation—is in effect the "touchstone" that allows us to form relationships with all three persons of the Trinity. Once again, I am not saying that every person who enjoys a relationship with God necessarily comes to it by hearing the Gospel. I am simply saying that Christians believe God has offered us an opportunity to enter into relationship with him through the person of Jesus Christ; this is the

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Prayer List

Clergy

■ **For Henry, a Presbyterian minister** who has begun attending OCIA and is preparing himself for the very difficult work of resigning his pastoral ministry to enter the Catholic Church; that the Lord will give him the courage he needs to follow his conscience in this matter.

■ **For Dan, a Protestant pastor** who has begun seriously studying the case for the Catholic Church; that the Lord will lead him on this new spiritual journey.

■ **For Tyler, a Pentecostal pastor** who recently stepped down from ministry as he feels drawn to the Catholic Church; that the Holy Spirit will bless him with peace as he seeks to lead his family home and discover God's plan for his future employment.

■ **For Daniel, a Protestant minister** raised by extremely anti-Catholic parents, who has recently come to believe that "Bible only" Christianity cannot be true and finds himself on a path toward the Church; that the Holy Spirit will give him courage to follow His leading.

■ **For Veli, a Lutheran pastor** who after a number of years ministering within the Lutheran Church feels himself being called to the Catholic Church and is meeting with a bishop to discuss; that the Holy Spirit will lead him.

■ **For Chandler, a minister in the Church of Christ** who has begun reading and listening to the case for Catholicism and finds himself powerfully drawn; that the Lord will give him wisdom to know how he should approach his family and navigate this journey.

■ **For John, a Baptist pastor** who has been powerfully drawn toward the Catholic Church for some time but faces serious difficulties that would make it very hard for him to actually leave his ministry at this time; that the Holy Spirit will lead him and comfort his as he tries to understand what he should do.

■ **For Caleb, the pastor of a thriving Baptist Church** who has had his world turned upside down as he has begun to study the early Church Fathers and is realizing that the early Church was not a Baptist Church; that the Lord would guide him and provide consolation as he continues along the path of discovering the fullness of truth in the Catholic Church.

■ **For Aaron, a non-denominational pastor** who has entered OCIA; that the Lord's would continue leading him as he works to bring his family into the Catholic Church.

■ **For Austin, an Evangelical pastor** who has been drawn to the Catholic Church for a long time and who has recently become convinced that his time as a Protestant minister is nearing an end; that the Lord will bless him as he is currently attempting to find new ways to support his family.

■ **For Toby, a Baptist pastor** who 18 months ago began a deep study of the early Church and the case for Catholicism; that the Lord will lead him in his studies and eventually to his true spiritual home.

■ **For Richard, a Presbyterian pastor** who recently resigned his ministry to enter the Catholic Church with his wife and children; that the Lord will bless them living in a new city with new jobs in Catholic education.

■ **For Karen, a Baptist**, that she may be given the grace of perseverance and wisdom as she and her family begin their journey home to the Church.

■ **For Vicky, a Non-denominational Protestant**, that the Holy Spirit bless her with the gift wisdom and continued conversion and a strong faith in Jesus for her and her family.

■ **For Jacob, a former Agnostic**, that his family will come to see the joy the Catholic Church is bringing to him.

■ **For Tonio**, that the Holy Spirit would bless and guide his journey to the Sacrament of Confirmation.

■ **For Lee, a member of the Church of England**, that he may find an open door to full communion with the Catholic Church.

■ **For Robbie, a Jewish brother**, that he may rejoice in the fullness of the faith of the Messiah in the Easter Sacraments.

■ **For Matt, a Baptist**, that he may enter into full communion with the Catholic Church with much joy.

■ **For Chris, a Lutheran**, that all of his many questions may be answered through the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

■ **For Regriel, a Methodist**, that as he studies God's Word, he may discover his path to the holy Eucharist.

■ **For Oscar, a former Catholic**, that the grace of our Lord Jesus would guide him back to the holy sacraments.

■ **For Will, a former Agnostic**, that he may discover clarity and truth during his OCIA journey.

■ **For Andres, a former Oneness Pentecostal**, that the Holy Spirit guides him and gives him consolation.

■ **For Allen, a Non-denominational Evangelical**, that our Lord continues to guide his prayer and studies.

■ **For Casey, a former Agnostic**, that the grace of Jesus and the guidance of the Holy Spirit would enable him to get his life on track.

Laity

■ **For Rita, a former Catholic** on her journey back home, that she may stay strong in her journey back to the Church, and that her children and siblings return to the faith.

■ **For Erin, a Non-denominational Protestant**, that the Lord would bless her daughter with physical healing and the grace to grow close to the Lord in her suffering.

■ **For Keyla, a Presbyterian**, that the Holy Spirit would grant her clarity, peace, and unity in her marriage, wisdom in their search for truth, and that her daughters may grow in a strong, joyful, and secure faith.

IMPACT TESTIMONY

"I was referred to The Coming Home Network in early 2024 while I was quietly wrestling with my sense of call as a pastor and a growing interest in the Catholic Church. I was cautious and guarded, unsure who I could trust with what I was experiencing. From our very first conversation, the staff at CHN made it clear that I was not alone. Their care, wisdom, and willingness to walk with me brought both comfort and freedom during a very uncertain time. After months of prayer and discernment, my wife Cami and I came to the decision to enter the Catholic Church together, along with two of our children. Because of generous supporters, we

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were able to attend a CHN retreat and the Clergy Converts Conference—experiences that strengthened and encouraged us deeply. Since then, God has borne remarkable fruit through our family and friends. We are profoundly grateful for the donors who make this ministry possible. Thank you for walking with us."

— Aaron (and Cami) Gunsaulus

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 CHNetwork
P.O. Box 8290
Zanesville, OH
43702-8290

 740.450.1175

 info@chnetwork.org

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CHNetwork was founded to help men and women, clergy and laity, from every background imaginable, discover the truth and beauty of the Catholic Church and make the journey *home*.

COMPASS

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normative way to do so, in the sense that God has not guaranteed any other way for it to happen. On the other hand, because God is not limited by the order he has established, it is quite possible (and I think very likely) that he enters into relationship with other people according to his will, through ways known only to him.

The second objection runs as follows: "Jesus Christ is no longer here. How can I have a relationship with someone who is not present?" If that claim were true, then Jesus' contemporaries must have enjoyed a huge advantage over everyone else. The Christian (or at least Catholic) response is that while he walked the earth, Jesus established a Church. This no mere human institution or priestly hierarchy. More

than anything else, the Church is, mystically, the abiding presence of Christ on earth, the tabernacle in which he dwells. Catholics believe—for reasons that merit explanation of a sort that lie well beyond the scope of this article—that Jesus Christ is "substantially present" in the Eucharist. This means that when the Eucharist is offered on the altar of any Catholic Church in the world, Christ becomes present among us in the consecrated bread and wine, in both his divinity and his humanity, just as he was to his first disciples. We cannot perceive him with our natural senses as they did, but we can nevertheless experience his presence and the blessings it brings through our participation in the Eucharist, in particular by receiving him in Holy Communion. ■

Read the full article at chnetwork.org/revelation

UPCOMING EVENTS

Join members of our staff and others on the journey at one of our in-person events coming this spring!

CHNETWORK SPRING RETREAT

March 9-11, 2026

St. Benedict Center in Schuyler, NE

Find more information and register at CHNetwork.org/retreats

Interested in having one of our staff speak at your parish?
Contact us at speakers@CHNetwork.org

CHNETWORK UK RETREAT

September 14-16, 2026

Franciscan Centre in Godalming, England

Find more information and register at CHNetwork.org/retreats

CLERGY CONVERT CONFERENCE

May 1-3, 2026

St. Paul Center in Steubenville, Ohio

Find more information and register at CHNetwork.org/clergyconference

CHNETWORK FALL RETREAT

October 5-7, 2025

Maria Stein Retreat Center in Maria Stein, Ohio

Find more information and register at CHNetwork.org/retreats

To stay up-to-date on all CHNetwork retreats, conferences, and talks, visit CHNetwork.org/events.

READ, PRAY, GIVE AWAY!

Once you've finished reading this issue of the CHNewsletter, consider sharing it with someone who might enjoy it as well! (They can always sign up to receive their own at chnetwork.org/join)

...Journeys Home Continued...

teachings. Catholic college students, who had grown lukewarm in the faith that had been handed down to them from birth, seemed to be re-energized as they saw their faith through my eyes, as an outsider who wanted to learn more. A priest instructed me on a weekly basis in each chapter of the Catechism, "Life in Christ," helping me to work through my doubts about the Catholic Faith.

The idea of saints interceding in daily life initially struck me as foreign, even superstitious. But as I spent more time in the parish, I began to notice how naturally the older parishioners spoke of Saint Anthony when they'd lost something, or how a woman would light a candle for Saint Jude when her son was struggling. What might have seemed like magical thinking revealed itself as something more intimate. These weren't distant theological figures but companions in the everyday struggles of life.

I found myself drawn first to Saint Thomas Aquinas during finals week, not because I believed in some cosmic intervention, but because there was comfort in knowing that someone who had wrestled with doubt and intellectual questions had walked this path before me. When I whispered a quick prayer to him before exams, it felt less like asking for supernatural help and more like acknowledging I wasn't alone in the struggle to reconcile faith and reason. Gradually, this expanded to other saints—Saint Augustine when I battled with moral failures, Saint Teresa when prayer felt dry and empty.

The breakthrough came when I realized this wasn't about believing in magical interventions but about entering into the communion of saints that the Creed speaks of. These men and women who had lived, struggled, and died in faith somehow remained present, their experiences and intercessions weaving through the fabric of daily life. It was less about them changing my circumstances and more about them accompanying me through them, their lives serving as both example and encouragement that holiness was possible even in the midst of very human struggles.

The "Marian spirituality" of the Blessed Mother resonated with me, but I felt guilty about being drawn to her because that was something I thought a good Protestant boy should not do. Mary represented qualities that speak to universal spiritual longings, such as unconditional love, comfort in suffering, and intercession during difficult times. She became, for me, a model of faithful surrender to God's will. Her maternal presence was particularly appealing, offering me nurturing spiritual guidance. The rich tradition of Marian art, music, and literature carried profound beauty that transcended denominational boundaries. Marian hymns like "Ave Maria" and paintings of the Madonna and Child moved me by their spiritual depth and artistic beauty.

Still, I questioned where this was heading. Shouldn't our emphasis, as Christians, be on Christ as the sole mediator between God and humanity? My friends frowned when they saw me praying the Rosary, saying that praying to or through Mary diminishes Christ's unique role in our salvation and borders on idolatry. I could only imagine what my mother and

father would think if they found out I was praying the Rosary. I felt as though I was betraying the core beliefs of my family and the community. My heart felt drawn to something beautiful and meaningful, while my mind was ringing with alarms. I wondered if my attraction represented spiritual growth or spiritual compromise, authentic devotion or dangerous deviation.

Then there was my struggle with the Church's European heritage. I was genuinely drawn to Catholicism's global character—through books and magazines, I could see a faith tradition that spanned continents and cultures. Yet I couldn't ignore how Catholic imagery, liturgy, and leadership had been predominantly European-centered for centuries. Would embracing this tradition mean accepting a framework that had historically overlooked people who looked like me? My friends raised pointed questions about European colonialism's use of Christianity as a tool of cultural domination, reminding me of the Church's complicity in slavery and the suppression of indigenous practices. These concerns weighed heavily on me.

But then I discovered the wealth of literature available in the church narthex—books by Thomas Merton, Dorothy Day, the Church Fathers, and mystics like John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila. This collection exposed me to dimensions of Catholicism I hadn't known existed, from contemporary writers like Marshall McLuhan and Charles Taylor to ancient texts dating back to the first centuries of the Church. I began to see that Catholicism had a rich intellectual tradition that challenged rather than simply reflected the dominant culture. This was refreshing after encountering anti-intellectualism in some Protestant circles. More importantly, these texts revealed that Christianity was meant to be encountered and embodied, not just believed as abstract ideas. Through my experiences with parishioners and my reading, I was beginning to understand that faith was incarnate and sacramental—lived out around kitchen tables, in supermarket lines, at the bedsides of the sick and dying. Still, one question nagged at me: how would I fit in?

At that time, there were very few people in the American Catholic Church who were not of European descent. Many of my Black American friends pressed me on this, asking, "What are you doing going to that 'White Church'?" To them, the Catholic Church was Eurocentric, and my plans to convert to Catholicism felt like a rejection of Black American culture, heritage, and the Black community. They told me the Catholic Church would erase my Black identity. I had to struggle with this because, if it came down to that, I didn't want to break ties with people who had been important in my upbringing.

Universal Belonging

One of the great benefits of my faith formation was meeting Catholics from Africa, Asia, and South America. This exposed me not only to the Church's diversity, but helped me realize—through these students' example—that my identity wasn't merely linked to social categories, but defined by being born in God's image and baptized into the Body of Christ. A Nigerian student in my dorm, raised Catholic, was living proof that African experiences weren't incompatible with the

...Journeys Home Continued...

Church's universality.

I began reading about ancient Christian traditions predating European colonialism—Ethiopian Orthodox connections, early African Christianity, how Christianity itself emerged from the Middle East and North Africa, not Europe. I discovered saints from every continent: Northern African Catholics like Augustine of Hippo, Black Catholics like Martin de Porres and Benedict the Moor. The Church's social justice tradition spoke powerfully—from Latin American liberation theology to Catholic involvement in civil rights, emphasizing universal human dignity and preferential option for the poor.

In the Catholic Church, I found liberation from constraints I'd accepted based on secular cultural identities. The Church didn't erase who I was; it broadened and transformed me. I was free to embrace humanity's vast cultural heritage.

In liturgy, I sang hymns by medieval monks alongside African American spirituals, prayed with Spanish mystics and Irish saints, celebrated Ugandan martyrs and German doctors of the Church. It felt like inheritance, not appropriation. Aquinas's insights, Teresa of Avila's mysticism, Dorothy Day's activism—all belonged to me now, just as my cultural gifts belonged to the universal Church.

I moved from secular culture's limiting categories to discovering myself within something infinitely larger. Where narrow identity markers once confined me, I was invited into two millennia of human experience across every continent. My particular identity gained deeper meaning within this larger narrative. My experience as an African American man connected to all Christian history—from early martyrs to Desert Fathers, from Ethiopian monks to contemporary African cardinals shaping doctrine in Rome.

I was no longer just a young Black man navigating modern America, but part of an unbroken chain of believers who found in Christ both affirmation of their sufferings and promise that suffering wasn't the final word. I inherited the wisdom of ages, connected to believers across cultures wrestling with meaning, suffering, love, and transcendence. This liberation felt like breathing deeply after years in cramped spaces.

What began as a childhood fascination with crucifixes and foreign liturgies became an unexpected homecoming. The God who called me through beauty had formed me through grace, revealing my spiritual wandering as preparation for this recognition. In embracing the Catholic Church, I discovered conversion as fulfillment, not abandonment—completion of my story within salvation's eternal narrative. Cultural categories' narrow confines gave way to universal communion's expansive embrace.

In the end, the Church found me through her patient work of providence, beauty, and grace. What seemed a departure from Protestant roots became their deepest flowering, as if my ecumenical childhood had prepared me for this moment when my spiritual journey's scattered pieces finally found their home in the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church.

My Priestly Vocation

It has been more than forty years since I entered full

communion with the Catholic Church. Although I have had moments of doubt—especially following the sexual abuse scandal and the political polarization that has touched even parish life—I have never regretted that decision. The questions that once seemed like obstacles to faith have become deepening invitations into its mystery.

Nearly forty years after entering the Church, I was ordained as a diocesan priest. Today I serve as administrator for a personal parish for Black Catholics in Pittsburgh, and I spend considerable time in Catholic schools where many Protestant African American students are discovering, as I once did, that faith need not be confined to narrow cultural or racial boxes. I don't seek to diminish their traditions, but I want them to have the same opportunity I had, to encounter a faith expansive enough to embrace the full complexity of human experience and identity.

The same tensions that shaped my own journey toward Rome continue to shape the Church today. Liturgical divisions between traditional and contemporary worship threaten unity rather than celebrating our catholicity. Social media offers unprecedented access to quality catechesis while undermining the face-to-face community that remains essential to sacramental life. Yet these challenges remind me why the incarnational character of our faith matters so deeply. In a world of increasing abstraction and virtual connection, Catholicism insists that grace comes through material reality through bread and wine, through human community, through the messiness of institutional life.

As a priest, I have dedicated my ministry to making this incarnational faith accessible, particularly in what often feels like spiritual deserts. Whether through Catholic education, evangelization that honors cultural diversity, or social teaching that refuses to separate moral theology from lived experience, the goal remains the same: to help others discover what I found in that small college parish decades ago, that the sacred doesn't abandon the ordinary but transforms it from within. The journey that began with a restless undergraduate's questions has become a lifetime of accompanying others as they discover that Christianity, at its best, doesn't diminish our humanity but reveals its deepest possibilities. ■

Fr. Matthew Hawkins serves as administrator of St. Benedict the Moor Parish in the Diocese of Pittsburgh and chaplain to St. Benedict the Moor School and Oakland Catholic High School. A convert to Catholicism who was ordained over forty years after entering the Church, Fr. Hawkins is dedicated to making the richness of Catholic tradition accessible across cultural and racial boundaries. His ministry focuses on Catholic education, culturally sensitive evangelization, and the integration of Catholic social teaching with moral theology, all grounded in an incarnational spirituality that finds the sacred woven through the fabric of everyday life.

The Coming Home Network International
PO Box 8290
Zanesville, OH 43702-8290

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A PRAYER OF SURRENDER FOR LENT

*Take, O Lord, and receive my entire
liberty, my memory, my understanding
and my whole will.*

*All that I am and all that I possess
You have given me: I surrender it
all to You to be disposed of
according to Your will.*

*Give me only Your love and Your grace;
with these I will be rich enough, and
will desire nothing more.*

THE SUSCipe, ST. IGNATIUS OF LOYOLA



February 2026 Newsletter