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# THE COMING HOME NETWORK INTERNATIONAL

Journeys Home

## Through the Wasteland

John Knutsen

“The Catholic Faith is archaic and irrational.”

“The Catholic Church hinders progress in science and medicine.”

“The Church drains and opposes everything that makes life rich and meaningful.”

“The Church demeans women and gay people.”

“The history of the Catholic Church is bathed in blood, full of atrocities committed by hypocrites.”



For many years, the above sort of thing was my creed. G.K. Chesterton famously wrote that “There are two ways of getting home; and one of them is to stay there. The other is to walk round the whole world till we come back to the same place” (*The Everlasting Man*). My walk away from the Catholic Faith began in ignorance and indifference and passed through the barren wasteland of worldliness and atheism before I found my way back home.

I was born to a Catholic family in the Central Valley of California just a few years after the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965), baptized on the very day the “new Mass” took effect around the world. Like so many Catholics of my generation, I never learned the faith and my family didn’t talk about or

live it at home beyond going to Sunday Mass. I went to public schools and was enrolled in the parish religious education program, but as often as not, I would run to a friend’s house to play as soon as my mom’s car disappeared around the corner. Later on, I served as an altar boy, but by the time I approached Confirmation age, my parents were no longer making me go to Mass, so I simply drifted away.

During high school, I taught myself to play the bass guitar and formed a band with some friends. Music and girls were my passions, the twin poles around which my life revolved, though I was far more successful with the former than I was with the latter. I wanted to be a rock star and had no intention of going to college, so I regularly cut class and got into trouble on occasion. I let my hair grow long, and my rebellion against whatever I perceived to be ordinary was always on quiet and brooding display. Underneath it, however, was a quest for authenticity

Continued on page 2

## ...Journeys Home Continued...

and purpose. Like most teenagers, I wanted to be fully alive and to burn brightly.

Probably due to teenage rebellion against everything my parents represented, I grew hostile toward Christianity, especially toward the Catholic Church. On one occasion, some Christians were on the corner outside the school, handing out little Bibles. Always eager to make a statement, I took one and silently tore out the pages as I walked away. To my mind, religion in general, and Christianity in particular, deserved no less than this.

### Death and Atheism

One Christmas when I was in college, my oldest brother, Erik, came home and delivered the devastating news that he was HIV-positive. He was a talented actor and Juilliard graduate living in New York. It wasn't long before he became too sick to stay in New York, so he returned to California, and my parents converted a spare bedroom into a hospice. My father and other brother took magnificent care of him, but I couldn't face it; I spent as much time as possible with my girlfriend, away from the house. Erik died at home late one night in 1993, with most of the family standing around his bed, just a few weeks past his 30th birthday.

Erik's death was a strangely unemotional experience for me. I remember kneeling on the floor and placing my head on his pillow after he had passed, looking into his face. Though it was clear that whatever had made him him was gone, I concluded that there could not possibly be a God and that, since this is the only life we have, we'd better make the most of it. I believed that Erik had been snuffed out, as all of us will be one day, and that life itself is absurd and even a cruel joke. I made an affirmative choice for atheism that night. Ironically, looking back, his death was actually the beginning of my slow return to the Church, because for the first time I began to think about the bigger questions of life and death. Archbishop Fulton Sheen was exactly right when he noted that "Atheism is not a doctrine; it is

a cry of wrath" (*Fulton Sheen's Wartime Prayer Book*). Over time, I became an angry and militant atheist, even mocking and attacking my mother's faith whenever she would gently tell me that I needed God in my life. If the "new atheists" had been active then, I have no doubt that I would have become their disciple. Instead, I found ammunition in the works of older atheists, such as Friedrich Nietzsche, Bertrand Russell, Albert Camus, Jean-Paul Sartre, Samuel Beckett, and others. Existentialist philosophy held a particular appeal to me.

### The Old Country

While in college, I also had the opportunity to spend a summer studying in Rome, and as a budding historian minoring in Classical Civilization, I happily lost myself among the ruins of that ancient city. We visited a lot of churches too, of course, and I was awed by the sheer scale of St. Peter's Basilica and the faith that went into its construction. Michelangelo's Pietà brought tears to my eyes, and I found the crypt beneath the church of Santa Maria della Concezione dei Cappuccini—decorated with the bones of hundreds of Capuchin friars arranged in elaborate patterns—fascinating and grimly thought-provoking. Death had been very much on my mind since Erik's passing, and I was stopped in my tracks by a placard in the crypt which read: "What you are now, we once were; what we are now, you will be."

I went on to a graduate program at the University of St. Andrews in Scotland in 1995, and two people in my dorm quickly caught my attention. One was a physician from Nigeria, probably in his 60s, pursuing a doctorate in the School of Divinity. He was the most joyful person I'd ever met, with a mile-wide smile and a deep interest in people, and he had a way of speaking very naturally about God, as though the truth of faith was the most obvious thing in the world. The other was a young Australian who was studying philosophy. She was the first person with whom I could talk about God and faith without growing defensive or antagonistic, and I was captivated

## RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

### SPIRITUAL AUTHORITY: WHO NEEDS IT? (DVD)

DR. PAUL THIGPEN

In a talk from our 2009 Deep in History conference, Dr. Paul Thigpen explores how reason, revelation, and experience play into the concept of truth, and why all three are necessary for a true understanding of how Jesus meant for the Church that He founded to operate



#1270 - \$15.00

### JOURNEYS HOME 3: PENTECOSTALS AND CHARISMATICS

In this collection of testimonies, Dr. Paul Thigpen, Kenny Burchard, and others from Pentecostal backgrounds share their experience in the Charismatic world as Protestants, and how their desire to be open to the leading of the Holy Spirit culminated in them coming home to the Catholic Church.



#3286 - \$12.95

### CATHOLICISM AND PENTECOSTALISM (DVD)

DR. PAUL THIGPEN

In this talk from our 2008 Deep in History conference, Dr. Paul Thigpen looks at the history of Pentecostalism, and its global impact on Christianity. Dr. Thigpen draws some surprising connections that reveal to both Catholics and Pentecostals that they have more in common than they may realize.



#1253 - \$15.00

by her childlike sense of wonder about everything. Neither of these good people tried to convert me, but for the first time I got to know serious Christians who were not only genuinely happy but intellectually sharp, and that in itself began to chip away at the stereotypes I'd long been content to rely upon.

Many other things happened in Europe which led me to examine my life with new eyes, such as a mysterious experience of Erik's presence on a bus in Edinburgh and an intense, painful relationship in Stockholm one winter that made me realize for the first time that I would never find the fullness of joy in romantic relationships, where I had long sought it. Still, I resisted all of this and kept insisting that religion is a pack of lies fit only for gullible weaklings. I did not want to believe.

## Collapse

Returning to the US in 1997, I took a job teaching history at the local Catholic high school (of all places!), but given the confused state I was in, taking on five sections of sophomores was bound to be a disaster. The kids rolled over me, and I fell apart and resigned at the end of the first week. Defeated and exhausted, with no sense of direction or purpose, I sank into depression and began to experience frequent panic attacks. In God's providence, however, teaching turned out not to be the reason I had taken the job. I was noticed on orientation day by an elderly priest who had just retired from teaching at the school: Fr. Clark Kelley, a member of a religious order called the Oblates of St. Francis de Sales. I liked him right away—he was a very jovial man with a sharp sense of humor and a passion for history.

At first, we talked only about our mutual interests, such as movies, books, and history, but in time I grew to trust Fr. Kelley and began to share with him the existential crisis in which I found myself. He gently and patiently responded to my questions and invited me to come to Mass at a local parish, where he would help out on Sundays. I would sit in the back pew and simply listen, not taking part in any other way. I loved to hear him preach, and he introduced me to the writings and spirituality of “the gentleman saint,” Francis de Sales (1567–1622), who would later become my patron at my Confirmation.

## The Real Presence

My mother was at this time the coordinator of the Perpetual Adoration chapel in their rural parish of St. Michael's, where the Blessed Sacrament was exposed 24 hours a day. People signed up to spend an hour or more each week with Jesus in silent prayer. Since I wasn't working, she frequently called upon me to substitute for people who, at the last minute, could not make their assigned hours. I would pace uncomfortably in the little chapel, debating aloud with the God I said I didn't believe in. I knew what, or rather Who, Catholics believed the Eucharist to be, but I thought it nonsense. And yet, I was very much aware that I was not alone in that chapel and found it unsettling. When I had a panic attack, which always happened at night, I got into the habit of driving over and sitting in the front pew of the main church. I was drawn to it, knowing only that I felt better when I left. It was a place of refuge, where

the panic attacks would be lifted for the moment, and that was enough. As long as no one else was around, I was able to relax and let the peace of the dark church quiet my unsettled heart.

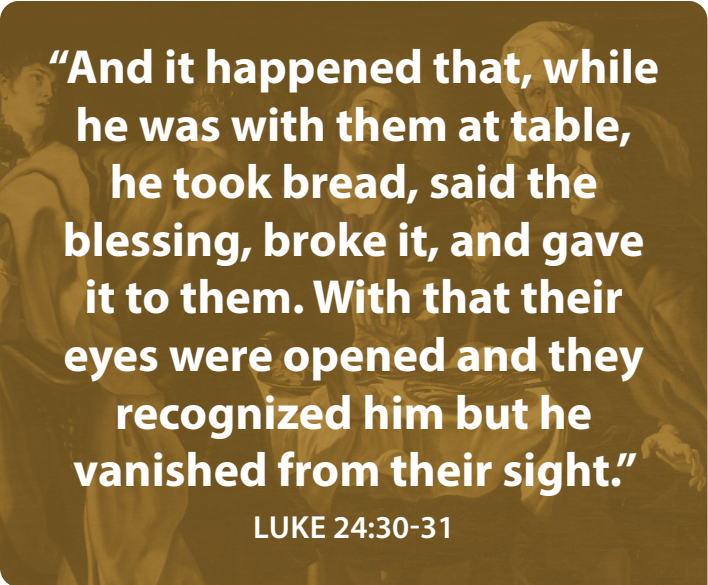
Over these months, while meeting regularly with Fr. Kelley and frequenting the church to sit in silence, I read a great deal from my father's extensive library: G.K. Chesterton, Hilaire Belloc, Christopher Dawson, Mortimer Adler, Frank Sheed, Thomas Howard, Ronald Knox, C.S. Lewis and others were my guides. Night after night, I would drop a book in my lap and admit that Christianity made a great deal of sense. Nevertheless, I could not take the next logical step.

Finally, one night, early in 1998, I had a particularly intense panic attack and went to the church as usual, where I wept in the front pew and fell to my knees in front of the altar and tabernacle, saying aloud, “I can't do this anymore. I need you.” When I left the church that night, I knew something had changed. I knew also that someone else had to know about it and hold me accountable or I would dismiss it as a dream the next morning. I drove across town in the rain and rang Fr. Kelley's doorbell. He later told me that as soon as he opened the door, he knew I'd given up the fight. He heard my confession, and just like that, I was back in the fold.

## Wrestling with God

I was not, however, happy about what had happened. It had the feel of a defeat, of having to admit my weakness. I could accept that God exists, but I didn't regard Him as loving or merciful, nor did I experience His love in any personal way. I imagined instead a rather stern authoritarian who would surely get back at me for all that I had done over the years. Authenticity remaining important to me, I knew that my life would now have to change because I had no desire to approach faith halfway or in a casual manner as I had seen so many Christians do.

The problem was that, although I wanted desperately to be at peace, I didn't really want to change in certain ways. I was still deeply attached to my sinful way of life, unwilling to let it go,



**“And it happened that, while he was with them at table, he took bread, said the blessing, broke it, and gave it to them. With that their eyes were opened and they recognized him but he vanished from their sight.”**

LUKE 24:30-31



# Being Formed in Joy



Dear Friends,

One of the great blessings of being Catholic is the way in which the Church, guided by the Holy Spirit, helps us to sanctify our time and attention through recurring liturgical seasons. We have seasons that are "ordinary," seasons for penance and mourning as we just concluded in Lent, and we have seasons of joy. During the upcoming 50 days of this Easter Season, the "feast of

feasts" (CCC 1169) and greatest of the Christian seasons of joy, we celebrate what J.R.R. Tolkien called the "eucatastrophe of the story of the Incarnation"—the joyful surprise that, just when all hope seemed lost, Jesus rose again victorious over sin and death. He has risen! Alleluia!

For many members of the Coming Home Network, this Easter Vigil and the days and weeks after will be moments of intense joy and discovery as they begin their life in full communion with the Catholic Church. However in the years to come, as we celebrate the Easter season again and again, at least some of the excitement will begin to fade. It is then that a more subtle aspect of these recurring seasons of fasting and feasting, mourning and joy, will begin to come to light. Easter, as a season of joy, is not just a time of passive *celebration* but a time of active *formation* in Christian joy.

Why do we need formation in joy? It seems an odd thing to say. Isn't joy just something that happens to us? When we speak of "joy" we're not talking about mere bodily pleasure or temporary gratification. Joy is not dependent on our physical circumstances, which is why it can be present even in the context of great suffering and uncertainty. The true joy for which we were originally created and destined is the result of friendship with the Lord. This side of heaven, while the journey continues, the cultivation of this friendship and growth in Christian joy is something that requires conversion, practice, and perseverance.

Consider, if you will, that familiar exhortation from Saint Paul's letter to the Philippians: "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice." (4:4) Contrary to how we sometimes think of it, joy is presented here not as something for which we are to just wait around passively hoping it will show up. Rather, we are exhorted to "rejoice"—that is, to actively seek our delight and fulfillment in the Lord. That we struggle to rejoice—to find joy in the God of the universe who loves us—this is, in a sense, our deepest human predicament, the root of our restlessness and our sin. We constantly seek and grasp for joy in things that we know cannot and will not satisfy: mere sensual gratification, power, possessions, the attention and praise of others, and in the end our own self-will and self-esteem. At the same time, when we do turn to face that which we know, rationally, is truly "enjoyable"—the almighty God, the giver of all good gifts—we find ourselves often nonplussed. Perhaps we do not desire joy as much as we thought

we did. As C.S. Lewis noted in his famous sermon, *The Weight of Glory*:

**"It would seem that Our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased."**

As the result of sin, both original and personal, we seek joy in all the wrong places, and even when we find it we are "halfhearted" in our desire.

God is calling us back to joy, but it will require our obedience, both in seeking the Lord and in accepting his discipline. To rejoice in the Lord is the vocation and destiny of the Christian soul. We were created for happiness, for beatitude—"to know, to love, and to serve [God], and so to come to paradise" (CCC 1721). Over and over, throughout the Old Testament, God reiterates in a hundred ways his invitation to peace, life, fulfillment, love, and the joy of salvation to his hard-hearted people: "O that my people would listen to me, that Israel would walk in my ways!" (Ps 81:13). At long last, in His great mercy, through the incarnation, Christ comes in the flesh to renew His Father's invitation and to show us the way:

**By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be my disciples. As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full. (Jn 15:8–11)**

The Christian journey is, in a sense, a lifelong "rejoicing" process through grace. Jesus came precisely to make this full joy possible: showing us that the resurrection of our joy—our true rejoicing—emerges only after we surrender and submit to the way of the cross.

As we enter into these 50 days of the Easter season of rejoicing—hopefully the first of many seasons we are blessed to experience—let's keep in mind that the celebration is formation. We precede this season with a time of mourning for our sins, submitting to discipline, and detaching our hearts from distractions. But Lent is not enough! With the Risen Christ, we enter into Easter joy, not as passive spectators, but as active participants, freely responding to the exhortation to rejoice in the Lord. Let us strive to make this season holy, set apart for focusing our time and attention on rejoicing anew in the Lord and His

*Being Formed in Joy continued*

good gifts. It is a time for purposeful celebration with family and friends, for persevering in prayer, and for drawing nearer to Jesus in the Holy Eucharist as the source of our abiding joy. And when this season draws to a close, may we resolve to carry this rejoicing with us always—even as we return to Ordinary Time.

In Christ,

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

*Eternal God, in Whom mercy is endless and the treasury of compassion—inexhaustible, look kindly upon us and increase Your mercy in us, that in difficult moments we might not despair nor become despondent, but with great confidence submit ourselves to Your holy will, which is Love and Mercy itself.*

Divine Mercy Chaplet Closing Prayer  
(Divine Mercy Sunday 2026: April 12)

# Joyful Journey Updates

## Ashley S., Former Congregational UCC Member

When I was received into the Catholic Church in January 2025, I wore a dress I had been crocheting by hand for nearly two years while waiting for confirmation. Much of my formation happened in that waiting, so my first year as a Catholic has been less about dramatic change and more about learning to live from within a home I had already come to trust. Shortly after my reception, my father died, and his death tested whether that trust could hold. Although our relationship had been difficult, and the grief itself was not diminished, I experienced an unexpected healing and joy in being able to pray for him within the life of the Church, with a sense that our relationship was not ended but held by God. That same season also led me to step away from my eleven-year career as an executive résumé writer and begin a master's program in psychology, trusting that God often forms us quietly through waiting, loss, and fidelity. ■

Do you have a journey update to share? Submit it to [info@chnetwork.org](mailto:info@chnetwork.org)

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

Monday, Apr 6

**Deacon Charlie & Jess Echeverry**

*Catholic Revert & Former New Age  
Orig. Air: 2/15/21*

Monday, April 13

**Shaun & Jessica McAfee**

*Former Evangelical Protestants*

Monday, April 20

**Matt Daniels**

*Former Baptist*

Monday, April 27

**Steve Sjogren**

*Former Vineyard 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

Monday, May 4

**Patrick Correa**

*Former Atheist*

Schedule is subject to change.

To access the full archive of past *Journey Home* programs go to [chnetwork.org/journey-home](http://chnetwork.org/journey-home)

IN MEMORIAM

# REMEMBERING DR. PAUL THIGPEN

1954 – 2026

Please join the Coming Home Network family in praying for the repose of the soul of Dr. Paul Thigpen, who passed away at the end of February at his home in Georgia.

Dr. Thigpen was a beloved friend of the Coming Home Network from the earliest days of our apostolate, having first appeared on *The Journey Home* in January of 1998, only a few months into the show's launch on EWTN television. Additionally, Paul served for a number of years as a Coming Home Network board member, and on staff as Director of CHResources from 2010-2011.

In many ways, Dr. Thigpen embodied everything that The Coming Home Network seeks to be; raised Presbyterian, he became an atheist as a young man, before having a radical conversion to Christianity that led him to pastor in both Assembly of God and United Methodist congregations before entering the Catholic Church in 1993. He went on to share aspects of his story on several episodes of *The Journey Home*, as well as the *Deep in Scripture* podcast and the CHNetwork Deep in History conferences. His testimony was also featured in the 2025 book *Journeys Home 3: Pentecostals and Charismatics*, in which he described how his experience in the Assemblies of God uniquely prepared him to be open to the teachings of the Catholic Church.

"I am greatly saddened to hear of my kind and good friend's passing," said Marcus Grodi, who founded the Coming Home Network in 1993, noting that Thigpen had been connected with CHNetwork since 1995, and attended the Network's 2nd ever retreat for clergy converts. "For more than 30 years, I was honored to call Paul a close friend. He has long been a model of kindness and joy. When I think of him, I see his broad smile and contagious laugh. May God rest his soul."

May Dr. Paul Thigpen rest in the Lord's perfect peace, and may the angels lead him into paradise.



## Clergy Convert Conference

2026 Theme: **Making a Home in the Catholic Church**

**May 1 - 3, 2026**

**St. Paul Center in Steubenville, Ohio**

We are excited to share our second annual Clergy Convert Conference taking place later this spring, co-hosted by the Coming Home Network in partnership with the Saint Paul Center for Biblical Theology. Intended for former Protestant & other non-Catholic Christian pastors and ministers who have become Catholic as well as those who are preparing to enter the Church—especially those converts who bring with them a love for sacred Scripture—this will be a one of a kind event!

The conference will feature talks from members of the Coming Home Network and St. Paul Center teams, including Dr. Scott Hahn, Ken Hensley, Dr. John Bergsma, Jeff Morrow, David Currie, and Kenny Burchard. You will also enjoy catered meals, evening social hour, and times for prayer and reflection. The goal of the event is to cultivate fellowship among clergy converts, provide encouragement in the ongoing journey of faith, and to reignite the fire for living out and sharing the Gospel now as Catholics.

**Conference Cost:** \$500

**Lodging/Accommodations:** A block of rooms will be available at the Best Western Plus Franciscan Square Inn and Suites Steubenville.

Find full details and register at [chnetwork.org/clergyconference](http://chnetwork.org/clergyconference)



# Prayer List



## Clergy

- **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 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 bless his journey ahead.
- **For Hugo, a lay-minister** who has been in the Evangelical world since he was 14 and is now beginning to doubt much of what he has been taught; that the Lord will provide consolation and direction on his journey.
- **For Scott, an Anglican priest** who at the end of 2024 entered the Church with his wife; that the Lord will help him to find God's calling for him as a Catholic.
- **For Israel, an Anglican seminarian** who with his wife this past Easter came into full communion with the Catholic Church; that the Lord will bless them as they attempt to chart their future from here.
- **For Randy, a Protestant with many years of successful ministry** who began a deep dive on the Catholic Church and is now facing the difficult question of what to do; that the Holy Spirit will enlighten him and give him the courage he will need.
- **For Justin, a former Protestant pastor** who has become Catholic and is dealing with a great deal of fallout in his personal life; that the Lord will console and heal.
- **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 Terry, a former Lutheran pastor** who after decades in ministry has returned to the Catholic Church in which he was baptized at the age of 16; that the Lord will show him how

can use the gifts God has given him in the Church.

- **For Ross, a Methodist lay minister** who has been attracted to the Church for some time, is learning all he can and looking forward to leaving his ministry to enter the Church when the Lord tells him the time is right; that the Lord will make the way clear for his path forward.
- **For Mathieu, a former Protestant seminarian** who has returned to the Church in which he was raised; that the Holy Spirit lead him as he seeks to lead his family home to the Church.
- **For David, a Methodist pastor** on his way toward the Church; that the Holy Spirit will lead him forward.
- **For Kelvin, a Baptist pastor** who has been exploring Catholicism for some years and has finally decided, at least intellectually, to consider entering the Catholic Church; that the Holy Spirit continue to lead in his life.

## Layity

- **For Kirby, a Nazarene**, that the Holy Spirit would guide his exploration into the Catholic Faith and that his family and friends would be accepting.
  - **For Alex, a Non-denominational Evangelical**, that the Lord would soften his wife's heart away from thinking he is no longer a Christian because of his interest in the Catholic Faith.
  - **For Stephen, a Pentecostal**, that our Lord Jesus would improve his health so that he is able to attend church.
  - **For Jeremy, a Baptist**, that he may find his true home in the holy Catholic Church.
  - **For Cole, a Non-denominational brother**, that his wife would be granted the grace to become open to his journey to the Catholic Church.
  - **For David, a member of the Church of England**, that he may discover the fullness of the Truth in the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church.
  - **For Mulan, an Episcopalian**, that he may find the guidance he desires in his journey to the Catholic Faith.
  - **For Glen**, that the Holy Spirit would
- bless, guide, and anoint his relationships and his journey of faith.
- **For Matthew, a former Agnostic**, that his wife and family might be understanding of his journey to the Catholic Faith.
  - **For Sam, a Presbyterian**, that his questions about the Catholic Faith may be answered well and understandably.
  - **For Eric, a Charismatic**, that he may gain a better understanding of the liturgy of the Mass.
  - **For Keely, a Pentecostal**, that the Holy Spirit may clear a path for her to enter the Church without sabotage or hindrance, and bestow her grace to persevere amidst feelings of loneliness.
  - **For Bonnie, an Evangelical Protestant**, that the Lord may grant her an increase in faith and a greater hunger for the Eucharist.
  - **For Elizabeth, a Pentecostal**, that God would provide for the physical and mental health of her son and grant her strength and wisdom as she cares for him and continues her journey home to the Church.
  - **For Anna, a Lutheran**, that the Holy Spirit would bless her with clarity to help her honor her parents' dedication to her faith journey, guide her in doing what is right for her marriage and children, and lead her to a faith community.
  - **For Sally, a member of the Church of the Nazarene**, that the Lord might bless her with healing and good health.
  - **For Rebecca, a Protestant**, that God would provide for her to receive support in her community as she comes home to the Church.
  - **For Lauren, a Baptist**, that the Lord would bless her with physical and spiritual healing for her family, especially her husband, and guide them on their continued conversion.
  - **For Michelle, a Baptist**, that the Holy spirit would guide her grandchildren toward a belief in the Catholic Church.
  - **For Sonja, an Episcopalian**, that God would draw her close and allow her to have the deeper spiritual experience she seeks with Him.



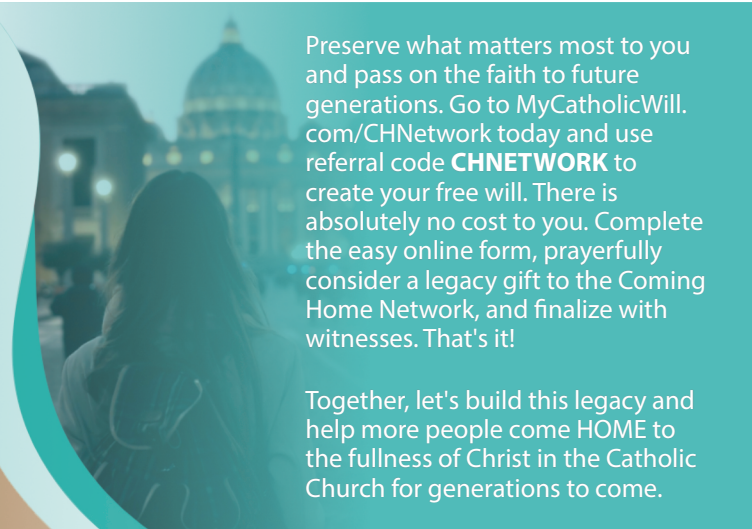
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**PROTECT YOUR FAMILY & HONOR YOUR FAITH WITH**



[MyCatholicWill.com/CHNetwork](http://MyCatholicWill.com/CHNetwork)



Preserve what matters most to you and pass on the faith to future generations. Go to [MyCatholicWill.com/CHNetwork](http://MyCatholicWill.com/CHNetwork) today and use referral code **CHNETWORK** to create your free will. There is absolutely no cost to you. Complete the easy online form, prayerfully consider a legacy gift to the Coming Home Network, and finalize with witnesses. That's it!

Together, let's build this legacy and help more people come HOME to the fullness of Christ in the Catholic Church for generations to come.

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*(former Presbyterian pastor)*

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The Coming Home Network International



CHNetwork



ComingHomeNetwork

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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# DECONSTRUCTING Dispensationalism

by Ken Hensley

If you have watched episodes of our show *On the Journey with Matt, Ken & Kenny*, you'll know that what Matt Swaim, Kenny Burchard, and I do in this show is something we like to refer to as "autobiographical apologetics." Put simply, we take the time to explain in some detail (yes, sometimes in more detail than anyone wants or has asked for!) the process of thought that led us from what we believed when we were Protestants to what we now believe as Catholics.

Over the past four years, we've worked through a number of important issues of faith relating to Scripture, Sacred Tradition, the Gospel, the Sacraments, the Church, Mary, the Mass, and other pivotal topics. In our newest series that we launched over Lent, "Deconstructing Dispensationalism," we've moved into a most fascinating area of Catholic teaching.

The title might lead you to ask: *Deconstructing what? What in the world is dispensationalism?* At its core, dispensationalism is a doctrinal system—unknown within the first 1800 years of Christian thought—that is now passionately held by tens of millions of Protestant fundamentalists and evangelicals, primarily in the United States.

**How did this come to be?** In the early part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, around the same period of time in which a number of other "end times" movements were coming into existence, especially Mormonism (1830), the Jehovah's Witnesses (1843), and Seventh-day Adventism (1863), a Plymouth Brethren pastor in England named John Nelson Darby developed his own way of interpreting Old Testament prophecy regarding Israel and the Church, the Second Coming, and the Millennial kingdom. His views were popularized in America through fundamentalist preachers such as D.L. Moody, through the prophecy conference movement, and especially through the massive popularity of the Scofield Reference Bible, which taught dispensationalism and, by the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, became *the* Bible of Protestant fundamentalism.

**What does dispensationalism teach?** Well, there's a lot to it, and no doubt you will want to watch the series we're doing for a full answer to the question. But suffice it to say, that if you've ever read Hal Lindsey's book *The Late Great Planet Earth* or any of the 16 volumes of the *Left Behind* series by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins, then you know what I'm talking about. In

fact, if you've ever listened to a Bible teacher who talks a great deal about the "end times," about Israel and the Church, the fulfillment of biblical prophecy in our time, the Rapture, the Anti-Christ, the Great Tribulation and Premillennial return of Jesus, it's virtually certain you were listening to a dispensationalist.

When I first came to faith in Christ, it was in a strongly dispensationalist environment. Before I knew anything about the differences between Protestantism and Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy, I knew that I was a dispensationalist. As it turns out, both of my partners in *On the Journey* held at least some aspects of the dispensationalist point of view when they were Protestants as well. **As Catholics, we no longer hold these views. In this series we're explaining why.** I encourage you to join us! ■



**On the Journey**  
With Matt & Ken  
and Kenny

Three former Protestants share the ideas and experiences that led them to the Catholic Church.



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**Deconstructing  
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because I didn't believe that God could offer anything to match those moments of real transcendence I had experienced through music and relationships with women. I imagined that being a Christian meant saying "no" to everything that made life rich—I had no concept yet of the deeper "yes" underlying each "no," nor much more than a dim awareness that my unhappiness was directly connected to the way I had been living. I didn't yet see the connection between Jesus and the Church He established, regarding the latter as something separate and strange, a sort of add-on to the Gospel.

I still clung to the very things that made me miserable because they were familiar, and I could not imagine my life without them. I did not yet understand that grace sets us free, whereas sin enslaves. When you have lived with tightly clenched fists for so long, indulging your baser passions, it can be very difficult to change.

I struggled with the Church's moral teachings in particular. Mine were not objections about the Trinity, the sacraments, or the liturgy, but rather what I understood to be the Church's view of sex, abortion, artificial contraception, homosexuality, and the like. It had not occurred to me that my assumptions could be wrong, so Fr. Kelley suggested that I study the faith in greater depth, noting that, after two millennia of pondering these things, the Church might just have something to say. I agreed and set my objections aside, allowing God to speak through His Church, and that was indeed a turning point. Rather than place each teaching of the Church on trial and demand that God satisfy me on every point, I let Him put me on trial and gave His Church the benefit of the doubt.

Through many conversations with Fr. Kelley, reading Scripture and the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, going to Mass, spending time in the Adoration chapel at St. Michael's, and watching EWTN, I came to understand that I had been wrong about what the Church teaches and why. I discovered that the Catholic faith is a richly textured tapestry, each teaching intimately connected to every other and that, taken together, it was like a glorious symphony. It was incredibly consistent, solidly rooted in the nature of who we are as men and women made in the image and likeness of God, and I found that deeply compelling and satisfying. Perhaps most importantly, I saw all the threads of my life coming finally together and realized that my deepest desires could be fulfilled after all.

### The School of Silence

By this time, I had decided on an academic career path. I was set to return on a scholarship to Scotland to begin a doctorate in ancient history when Fr. Kelley stunned me by suggesting that I might be called to be a priest. I dismissed it with a laugh, but it wasn't long before I couldn't stop thinking

about it. I consulted with another priest who lived at our parish; he was a good friend of the family and highly educated, and he suggested that I not start my doctorate until this question was settled. He advised spending time with religious communities to see how those who have made such a commitment live and to be able to talk with them.

It happened that an old knee problem reappeared at this time, requiring surgery and three months of recovery, and that gave me the excuse I needed to postpone Scotland for a year. Following recovery, I would have six months before I would be expected at St. Andrews, so while laid up I read Butler's *Lives of the Saints* every day and wrote to a lot of different religious orders.

I was particularly drawn to monastic life, especially the Trappists, having read and enjoyed Thomas Merton's *Seven Storey Mountain*. When back on my feet, I decided to take some time driving across the country to visit some of the religious communities I'd heard from. I had booked a week in the guest house at Assumption Abbey in Missouri as my first stop, and when I turned off the highway and onto the country road, I experienced a strong wave of anxiety, realizing that I had no idea what this place would be like or what I would do there for a week. I had to talk myself out of turning back, but I pressed on and was greeted by Brother Fidel, a very kind and hospitable monk from the Philippines.

It was winter, and darkness descended early. After dropping my bags off in the simple guest room, I made my way to the little abbey church for Vespers (evening prayer). It was completely dark except for the light of an emergency exit sign. Shadowy robed forms began shuffling quietly into the choir stalls, and suddenly the sound of chant rose up out of the darkness. I was transfixed. I might as well have been among the Benedictines of Solesmes in France, it was so beautiful to my jaded ears. After Compline (night prayer) that night, I stepped onto the porch of the guest house and looked out at the woods, and all at once I was overwhelmed by a deep sense of peace and an awareness of God's love unlike anything I had ever experienced. It was a personal love, and I knew that I was exactly where I was supposed to be and that He would be with me throughout this cross-country trek.

What had been primarily an intellectual conversion up to this point now reached my heart. All my life I had been something of an insomniac, my mind forever racing, but that night I was out as soon as my head hit the pillow. I have never slept so deeply and securely as I did that night. In the days that followed, I had wonderful conversations with an older monk while walking together in the woods, providing a great foundation for what was still to come that spring.

After leaving Assumption Abbey, I continued on, and in

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GIVE AWAY!**

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the end, it turned out to be a five-month journey that took me to many more monasteries and active religious communities around the country (too many in retrospect!). I quickly learned that settling the question of my vocation was not at all the purpose of this trek. Rather, God led me out into the desert to meet Him face to face. Like St. Paul, who disappeared into Arabia for three years following his first encounter with Jesus, God was drawing me out of my familiar surroundings in order to teach me how to pray and to show me the meaning of all that had happened. This was work that would not have been possible while working, playing in a band, dating, and preparing for the start of a doctoral program. It had to be done in the school of silence, especially in the cloisters that were my home during those beautiful months and which remain for me, to this day, precious places of refuge and restoration. I found the gentle rhythm of monastic life, with its balance of prayer and manual labor, to be deeply human and life-giving. One of my favorite sounds, even now, is the call of a monastery bell.

It was also a time of great interior struggle, and my journals were filled with the turbulence of coming to terms with what I had been, who I was now, and all that I yet longed to be. As C.S. Lewis said in *The Case for Christianity*, when you are on the wrong road, progress means turning around and going back the way you came, and that is not easy. It was a time in which my old desires were laid bare and the disordered state of my soul became painfully apparent. My desires had to be educated and reshaped. I had to learn to see, as if for the first time, not only women—in whom I had sought my identity for so long—but all of reality, and the cloister offered a safe haven in which to do this work.

Many of my lifelong assumptions were revealed to have been illusions and lies. It was shocking and exhilarating, discovering that life had meaning and direction, and that joy was possible, but looked nothing like I had expected. It was at the same time a period of sadness, because of what had been, and of great hope, because of what was yet possible. I was guided along this path not only by the wonderful monks and priests I met, but by St. Augustine, Thomas a Kempis, St. Francis de Sales, Thomas Merton, the Desert Fathers, and the medieval Cistercians, among others. St. Augustine's *Confessions* had an especially profound impact, the voice of a kindred spirit calling across fourteen centuries as though living in my own time. It was an extraordinarily rich time of grace, mercy, healing, and truth.

## Home Again

When I returned from this spiritual desert in the summer of 1999, I knew that mine was not an academic path. I gave up my place in Scotland, took a job on the east coast, and was finally confirmed. Not long afterward, I entered religious life for a time, first the Trappists and then the Dominicans, but the Lord revealed that mine was not a priestly or religious vocation. While completing a graduate degree in theology, I met my beautiful wife, Colleen, who was doing the same. She was immensely patient with me in a time of real transition, even waiting through a period when I returned to a monastery for

several weeks because I thought I might actually be called to that life after all. She was able to do that not only because she had also discerned a monastic vocation and understood its appeal, but also because she loved me and wanted me to follow the path to which I was called. We had read together a book called *Spiritual Friendship by St. Aelred of Rievaulx* (1110–1167) and wanted that to be at the heart of our relationship, wherever it might lead. I was able finally to settle the question of my vocation, and we were married in 2007, just a few steps from the tomb of St. Junípero Serra (1713–1784) in an old Franciscan mission on the central coast of California, where we'd had our first date and where I proposed to her—a mission I had visited for the first time after Erik's death.

As I look back over my life, I am filled with gratitude and wonder at the ways of God's providence. St. Paul speaks of the foundation laid by Christ, on which others build over time, and I can point to many who have done that work in my life, patiently laying stone after stone upon the foundation of the baptism I received as an infant. The rotting timbers and broken stones I had tried to set up had to be cleared away first, however, and that is always a painful process. But at every step, no matter how faulty or wrong-headed I might have been, God was there. He was there, too, in every moment of longing, every moment of despair and crying out to what I thought was a void. All my desires, in spite of the sinful ways in which I expressed them at times, were really my heart reaching out to Him, and He used them all to show Himself to me in His own time.

I have found the Christian life to be difficult but incomparably rewarding, and although I continue to stumble, I know in the depths of my soul that there is always hope, and that God is forever extending His hand to us, even when we can't see or feel Him in the moment. As Pope Francis wrote, "The Lord does not disappoint those who take this risk; whenever we take a step towards Jesus, we come to realize that he is already there, waiting for us with open arms" (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 3). I can affirm from personal experience that "with Jesus life becomes richer and that with Him it is easier to find meaning in everything" (*EG*, 266). I sought a meaningful life down the wrong paths for many years, groping in the dark, rejecting the only One who could truly give what I most wanted. And yet, "God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8). ■

*John Knutsen lives in Northern Virginia with his wife and daughter and is currently Director of the National Religious Retirement Office at the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops in Washington, DC. He previously worked in evangelization, adult faith formation, and catechist formation at the parish and diocesan levels in California and Virginia, as well as a brief stint with the federal government. His 2017 appearance on The Journey Home, along with his Signposts and Insights videos from 2019 can be found at [chnetwork.org/knutsen](http://chnetwork.org/knutsen).*

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*Almighty ever-living God, sole hope of the world,  
who by the preaching of your Prophets  
unveiled the mysteries of this present age,  
graciously increase the longing of your people,  
for only at the prompting of your grace  
do the faithful progress in any kind of virtue.  
Through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

#### A PRAYER FROM THE EASTER VIGIL

*Many of those we have been walking with at the Coming Home Network are coming into full communion with the Church this Easter. Please join us in praying for them in this next step of their journey.*



April 2026 Newsletter

