

November 2026 CHNewsletter

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THE COMING HOME NETWORK INTERNATIONAL

Journeys Home

Me With Him is Greater Than Me Without Him

By Bill Dunn

I grew up in a suburban Connecticut town, and my family went to Mass every Sunday. Every week after the 9:30am Mass, we had catechism class. This was so long ago, our teachers were nuns in full black-and-white habits.

The nuns taught us that an invisible, all-powerful, eternal God created the world. Back then, I didn't doubt the nuns, but I couldn't really comprehend what they were teaching us either. I more readily understood things I could touch, see, and hear—focusing my attention on more concrete items, such as Saturday morning cartoons, strawberry frosted Pop-Tarts, and playing baseball with my brother in the backyard. I didn't *disbelieve* the nuns, but I just could not wrap my brain around what they were teaching us.



When I went to high school in the early 1970s, my freshman biology teacher declared that all life on earth came into existence by purely random, unplanned, natural processes. He taught us that the entire universe is made up of only matter and energy, shaped by blind, random chance.

I clearly remember him telling us that if it were somehow possible to wind back the clock of time to the very beginning—to the moment of the Big Bang 15 billion years ago—and let it all play out again, we would never get human beings a second time. Our existence was such a fluke, it would never happen again even if we somehow could start over.

Now, the teacher did not say, "Therefore, everything the nuns tell you in catechism class is a bunch of superstitious nonsense." He didn't have to. I put two and two together. I understood that if what *he* was saying was true, that life on earth was an unplanned, random accident, it meant the lessons taught by the nuns were not. These two views about the origin of life were thoroughly incompatible.

Our teacher told us all the smart people—the scientists and doctors and professors—believed

Continued on page 2

what he was teaching. As an insecure 14-year-old, I definitely wanted to be at the cool kids' table, so I decided I would side with the smart crowd rather than the old-fashioned church people.

While I didn't use the word "atheist," that is what I had become. I decided that everything they were teaching me in church was a bunch of superstitious fairy tales. Since I lived in my parents' house, I still had to go to Mass each week. But I went with a smug attitude. I said to myself, "*I know better than these fools. I know the stuff they're saying here is pure mythology.*"

I'm not sure if my newfound atheism contributed to the substance abuse problem that quickly developed, but it sure didn't help. With atheism, the core belief was that our existence was an accident. During our short time here on earth, we struggle to survive. Then soon enough we die, and it's over; we cease to exist—no soul, no spirit, no life after death. With that as the understanding of reality, it was hard to make the case that life had any ultimate meaning.

One thing I especially liked about my new atheistic worldview was the premise that if there is no God, then there is no supreme law-giver. There is no supernatural Being who has the authority to tell us the moral code we should live by.

If human beings are the pinnacle of the evolutionary process, then we get to decide what's right and what's wrong. And who's to say one person's opinion is better than anyone else's? So, with atheism, we all get to make our own personal moral code, which I thought was great back then. The personal moral code I embraced was one of the popular anthems of the 1960s and '70s: "If it feels good, do it!"

Substance Abuse

As a 15-year-old high school kid, I quickly discovered that drinking beer and smoking pot made me feel good. Really good. So I did it. I really embraced getting drunk and high on a regular basis.

Since I lived in my parents' house, I couldn't exactly start chugging beers on the living room couch and rolling joints at the kitchen table. I had to live a kind of double-life, a two-faced existence. To my parents and teachers and coaches, I presented myself as a somewhat responsible student-athlete. But when I was with my friends on Friday and Saturday nights—look out! It was time for heavy binge drinking and dope smoking.

When I graduated high school and went off to college, the guardrails were removed. Now I was able to party whenever I wanted, however I wanted. I spent four years being infrequently sober. I did go to class just enough to maintain a solid C-minus average, to make sure I didn't flunk out. But my main focus that whole time was partying.

When I somehow graduated college, a very interesting thing happened. Some of my closest friends, my fellow heavy drinkers, got serious. They understood it was time to be responsible adults and they made that change. My roommate passed the CPA exam and went to work for a big accounting firm. Another close friend went to law school and became a successful lawyer. Yet another friend became a professional engineer and had a great career.

But I did not want to get serious. I wanted to continue living like a 19-year-old frat boy, and my employment record the next few years was not impressive. I bounced around from job to job, made very little money, and only cared about the next happy hour.

During this time, now in my mid-20s, I continued to live with a double-life, two-faced approach. To my parents and other folks in town, I came across as a fairly respectable young man. But when I was with my drinking buddies, my rallying cry was, "Let's get wasted!"

In the midst of this, I did manage to do a few respectable things, though: I married my high school sweetheart, Joyce; we bought a small house; and we had a baby. But deep down, I was still a mess, and to be honest, I cared about drinking more

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

WITH ONE ACCORD

DOUGLAS BEAUMONT

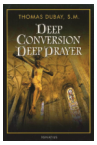


Former Evangelical professor Douglas Beaumont shows how to dialogue with Protestants by reasoning from the teachings that they already believe and practice. Using principles that orthodox, Bible-believing Protestants broadly affirm, Beaumont shows that in many cases the division isn't as wide or as deep as we thought.

#3269 - $10.17

DEEP CONVERSION, DEEP PRAYER

FR. THOMAS DUBAY



Fr. Thomas Dubay gives an overview of the spiritual life for anyone seeking to grow in the love of God and neighbor. Drawing on spiritual masters like St. John of the Cross and St. Teresa of Avila, Fr. Dubay gives solid practical advice for a deepening moral and spiritual conversion, as well as a radical growth in holiness.

#3262 - $15.95

THE FAITH OF OUR FATHERS

JAMES CARDINAL GIBBONS



Cardinal James Gibbons' famous and eloquent defense of Catholicism stands as one of the finest religious documents of his era, explaining the basic tenets of the Catholic Faith and why we hold them. This reprint is based off of the final edition published in the lifetime of the author, in 1917.

#3240 -$21.95

than I cared about them.

When Joyce was pregnant with our first daughter, we attended weekly Lamaze classes. In the 1980s, it had become popular for the father to be present during the delivery. Those classes taught us a lot about the biology of pregnancy and birth, and each of us was given an important assignment. Joyce's job was to remember to breathe when she was in labor. My job was to remember to tell Joyce to breathe when she was in labor. Unfortunately, they forgot to assign someone the job of reminding me to breathe when Joyce was in labor, and I almost passed out.

The day finally came. Joyce went into labor, and we drove to Yale-New Haven Hospital. Everything turned out great. Joyce was so strong and courageous. The baby girl was healthy—no complications. An hour or two after the birth, things were calming down. Joyce was lying in bed, cradling our daughter in her arms. I was sitting in a chair next to the bed, and after many days and weeks of stress, I finally was starting to relax.

Design Points to the Designer

Just as I was feeling calm, I was hit with a stunning thought. Like getting whacked in the head with a two-by-four, this thought flooded my brain: "*Wait a minute. What I just witnessed could not possibly be the result of a random cosmic accident. What I just witnessed was so intricate and so complex, there's no way it could be the result of matter and energy being shaped by blind random chance. I just witnessed an amazing marvel of bio-engineering, and it was obviously designed. And if it was designed, then there must be a Designer. A Designer with a capital 'D.' Yikes.*"

Many years later I read about the late Antony Flew, a noted British philosopher and Oxford professor. For much of his career he was an advocate of atheism. But in his 80s, he stunned his colleagues by declaring that the evidence indicated that there must be a God. He explained his thinking this way: "The material of DNA has shown, by the almost incredible complexity of the conditions that are necessary in order to produce life, that an Intelligence must have been involved….The only satisfactory explanation for the origin of this 'directed and self-replicating' life we see on earth is an infinitely intelligent Mind."

An infinitely intelligent Mind. While sitting in that hospital room, I did not think of it in those eloquent terms, but that was basically what was going through my head. I felt like I was on the verge of fainting—again. The foundation of atheism, which had been the basis of everything I thought and did for over 12 years, was crumbling. On that day, I stopped being an atheist. I didn't know what to believe, so I guess I was an agnostic. But it was a real shock.

For the next few months, I didn't change my behavior. But I did have nagging questions: *What is the correct explanation for our existence? Is it possible those old-fashioned nuns were right?!*

December rolled around, and it was a wonderful time since it was "Baby's First Christmas." Our daughter was the first grandchild on both sides of the family, so everybody was very excited. A few days after Christmas, one dark and cold night, the baby was sleeping, and Joyce was tired so she went to bed early. I was sitting in the living room by myself, drinking a beer, of course. There was nothing good on TV, so I started reading a little booklet that had arrived in the mail a few days earlier. It was published by an Evangelical church group, and it was a simple explanation of the Christian Gospel.

If that book had arrived before our daughter was born, I would've laughed and thrown it away as soon as I realized it was about religion. But that year, with all those questions swirling through my head, I was much more willing to take a look. It only took about 45 minutes to read, and it presented what they called The Four Spiritual Laws:

1. ***God loves us and has a wonderful plan for our lives.***
2. ***Mankind sinned, which caused a huge gulf between God and humans.***
3. ***Jesus Christ, God's only Son, came to reconcile sinful humanity back to God by dying on the cross and rising from the dead.***
4. ***If we put our faith in Jesus, we can have our sins forgiven, enter into a loving relationship with our Creator, and receive the gift of Eternal Life.***

This is not *just* an Evangelical Protestant thing. In the Catholic Charismatic Renewal movement, these same points are called The Four Spiritual Truths. And even though they're presented at kind of a fifth grade level—which was about all I could comprehend back then—they're not false. They contain the basics of the Gospel message. If you had only 30 seconds to summarize the Christian Gospel, those four points would be a great way to do it.

I was sitting in the living room, and after I finished reading the little book, I wondered, "Could this be the true explanation of life?" Then I looked over and saw our little plastic Nativity scene under the Christmas tree. In the middle of the creche, there was a tiny figurine of the baby Jesus. I stared at it for quite a while, then whispered, "So, you really are who people say you are. Hmm."

That evening, when I first sat down on the couch, I had been an agnostic. An hour later, when I got up to go to bed, I was a believer. My faith was no larger than a mustard seed, and I didn't really understand exactly what I believed, but I knew atheism was not true, and I sincerely desired to find out what was.

What happened to me was a drastic change in my view of reality. When I did not believe in God, I thought life was an accident that had no ultimate meaning. And if life had no meaning, then why NOT get drunk everyday? Ultimately, it just didn't matter. But with my new understanding that there must be some kind of supernatural Creator God out there, I realized life could have meaning. After all, why would God

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Will I Feel Different?



Dear Friends,

A little while back, my eldest daughter, Lucy, was preparing to receive the Sacrament of Confirmation. In the midst of all the preparations—choosing a patron saint and a sponsor, filling out paperwork, studying her catechism lessons, etc.—she turned to me at one point and asked: "Dad, will I feel different after I am confirmed?" What followed was a good chat about the nature of the sacraments and some of the mysteries of grace and the varieties of spiritual experience. In the end though, the gist of my answer to her was: I don't know whether you will *feel* different after you are confirmed, but I do believe you will *be* different.

Like many converts and journeyers in the Coming Home Network, coming from varied Protestant Christian theological and sacramental traditions and approaching the sacraments of the Catholic Church, my daughter asks a very natural and valid question. Part of what prompts the question about "feeling" is precisely the recognition of an incongruity between different people's experiences as well as one's own. Some conversion experiences are accompanied or even driven by strong emotions and a sense of God's presence. At times, our prayers, worship, and other religious experiences come along with feelings of joy, peace, calm, and wonder.

But these are not always or even ordinarily the case. And so the question is rightly asked: Will I feel something? What should or shouldn't I expect? What is the place of feelings and affectivity in my relationship with God?

Most of us know at least part of the answer to this question: feelings are nice, but they aren't the measure of reality. Just because you feel something—or don't feel something, or don't feel the correct something—is not the ultimate measure of the truth of things. Feelings aren't the ultimate measure as to whether God loves you and is present to you right now. They aren't the ultimate measure as to whether Baptism raises you to new life in Jesus Christ, whether you are truly forgiven in the Confessional, or to whether you indeed have received the Body, Blood, Soul, and Divinity of Jesus Christ into your body in the Holy Eucharist.

We have an existential intuition that while our feelings cannot mean or be *everything* or even the most important thing, they cannot be and mean *nothing*. They too are part of the human nature God gave us, and all that God gave us is good and meaningful, even if it has been tainted by the effects of sin.

One of the effects of original sin is a fundamental dis-integration and dis-harmony among the spiritual powers and faculties that make us human. We are all familiar with our proclivity as fallen human beings to be governed by the whims of feeling and emotion—to be dependent on positive emotions, and debilitated when they are absent. We tend to *feel* first, choose second, and think or reason (or more accurately, "*rationalize*") last. But in the beginning it was not so. The moral journey begins and proceeds in large part by restoring the intellect and will to their governing roles over emotion. We must think before we speak or act, and not just according to how we "feel". Following Jesus will often put us at odds with our temporary feelings and emotions in this life, calling us to challenge our fears, discipline our desires, and think, pray, act, and speak, often when we have little feeling of motivation to do so.

This struggle between our heads and hearts is part of our moral journey, but it is not our destiny. A favorite quote of mine from the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* can be found in the larger section on the Church's moral theological framework, and the specific section on "the Morality of the Passions." There we read the following:

> **Moral perfection consists in man's being moved to the good not by his will alone, but also by his sensitive appetite, as in the words of the psalm: "My heart and flesh sing for joy to the living God."**

When we talk about salvation as Catholics, we don't just mean "getting into heaven on a technicality." We precisely mean God's gift of our total conversion, healing, sanctification, and perfection as human beings—a transformation in Jesus Christ which will allow us to enter into perfect communion with the Holy Trinity. What the Church proposes in the quote above, is that this sanctification in Christ will not just mean the perfection of our intellect and will, but our "feelings" as well. Not only will our minds be fully opened and conformed to truth, and our wills fully conformed to goodness, but our hearts—our feelings, passions, our affective core—these too will be beautifully conformed to the reality of things. We will "feel" the way we ought to feel in response to God's truth, goodness, and beauty.

This Catholic vision of the restoration and perfection of our human nature to which we are destined is a beautiful one, and I think it can help us to make more sense of our own experience of the brokenness of sin and the variety and variability of the role of emotions in religious experience—and how the sacraments truly are a key to our healing.

In the sacraments, God promises that He will show up, that His grace will be at work in us—even and especially in ways and depths that we will neither perceive nor feel in the moment. The sacraments are our spiritual medicine offered to us by the Divine Physician. We need the medicine, but we also need to come to know, trust, and love—and indeed to obey—the physician, even when we don't "feel" like it. By God's grace, when we choose to trust and obey Him, He continues the healing and sanctifying process within us—enlightening our minds, purifying our wills, and I believe in the end, conforming also our hearts—our emotions and passions—to that of the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus.

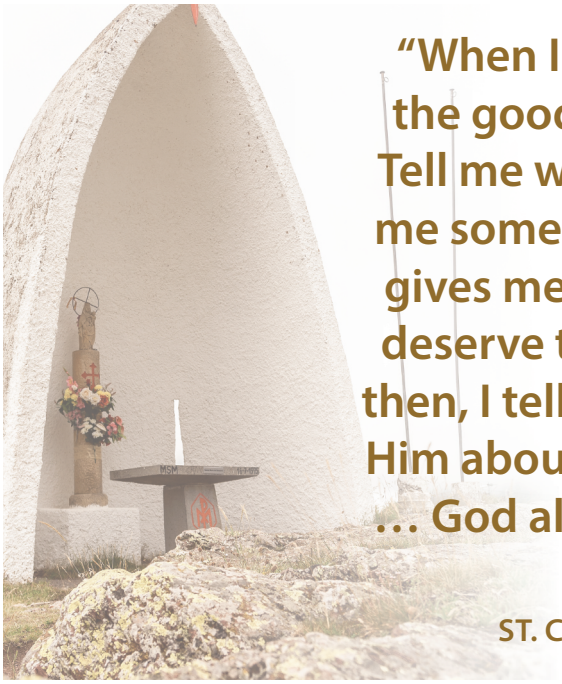
So a different way to answer the question "Will I *feel* different?" might be this: Yes. Yes you will feel different. Perhaps not at the moment of your confirmation (or baptism, reconciliation, or first holy communion). Perhaps not every time you choose to pray, worship, or carry out the good works God has called you to do. But you will—in the end, by God's grace—*feel*, not just different, but *right*. In the end your heart will sing with joy to the living God.

O Jesus, meek and humble of heart, make my heart like unto thine.

In Christ,



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



"When I go to the Chapel, I place myself before the good God and I say to Him: 'Lord, I am here. Tell me what Thou would have me do.' If He gives me some task I am content and I thank Him. If He gives me nothing, I still thank Him since I do not deserve to receive anything more than that, and then, I tell God everything that is in my heart. I tell Him about my pains and my joys and then I listen. … God always speaks to you when you approach Him plainly and simply."

ST. CATHERINE LABOURE—FEAST DAY: NOVEMBER 28

READY TO

BECOME CATHOLIC?

Instruction for the Order of Christian Initiation of Adults (OCIA) is underway in most parishes. If you are taking part in the OCIA process this year, or if you are an OCIA leader or sponsor, please let us know! Email us at *info@chnetwork.org*

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

Monday, Nov 2
Luma Simms
Former Orthodox & Evangelical

Monday, Nov 9
Doug and Dawn Doughan
Former Evangelical Youth Ministers
Original Air Date: 11/8/21

Monday, Nov 16
Eric Anderson
Former Presbyterian

Monday, Nov 23
Dan Teller
Convert from Judaism



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, Nov 30
Dr. MaryJo Burchard
Former Non-denominational Missionary
Original Air Date: 7/26/21

Schedule is subject to change.

To access the full archive of past *Journey Home* programs go to ***chnetwork.org/journey-home***

IN MEMORIAM

Please join us in praying for these and all members of our Coming Home Network family who have gone on to their eternal rest over the past year.

Ms. Anne Hoffman
* Dr. Brent Robbins
Rev. Carmen Perry
Cornelius O'Leary
Denis Janes
* Doug Lowry
Fr. Henry Dorsch
Lenny Alt
Ms. Marilyn Evans
Mrs. Mary Bradley
Rev. Michael Sciberras
Mrs. Patricia Dohrer
Mr. Paul O'Malley
Mr. Paul Reinke Jr.
* + Dr. Paul Thigpen
Mr. Robert Pumford
Mr. Robert Vecellio
* Dr. Robert Louis Wilken
Mr. Wayne Pflueger

* - Guest on *Journey Home*
+ - Written testimony at *chnetwork.org/story*

COLLECT FOR ALL SOULS

Listen kindly to our prayers, O Lord, and, as our faith in your Son, raised from the dead, is deepened, so may our hope of resurrection for your departed servants also find new strength. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God, for ever and ever. Amen

COMPASS

November is a month dedicated on the Church's calendar to praying for the souls of the faithful departed. Each year at this time, we remember with special gratitude the faithful partners in mission who have gone before us—friends whose prayers and generosity have helped make the work of The Coming Home Network possible.

Would you take up their baton? This month we want to invite you to Join COMPASS, our community of monthly donors, in their honor and in their memory. Together, we can carry this mission forward for those still making the journey home.

PIONEER	PATHFINDER
$10/month	$25/month
GUIDE	**NAVIGATOR**
$50/month	$100/month

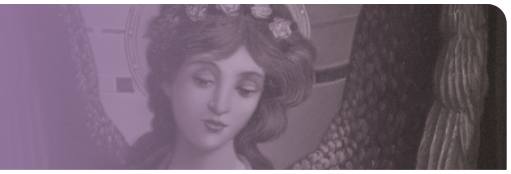
CHNetwork.org/Compass

Please contact Ann at **740.450.1175** or via email ***ann@chnetwork.org*** if you have any questions.

"[Jesus] will always be with us in our trials, walking with us and sustaining us. He Himself promised us, calling us to follow Him closely, and His word will never fail. Sometimes we may have to suffer along the way that leads to the holy mountain of perfection, but we will not be discouraged, because whoever ignores the purpose of Christian suffering does not recognize and know what is great and wonderful in her days. The science of suffering is the science of the saints."

ST. FRANCES XAVIER CABRINI
FEAST DAY: NOVEMBER 13

Prayer List



Clergy

- **For Rick**, who has resigned his ministry within the Vineyard Church and is in the process of becoming Catholic and who faces many obstacles as he seeks to bring his family with him.
- **For Arthur, a retired Lutheran pastor** drawn to the Catholicism of his youth but attempting to lead a family where there is no interest in even looking at the Catholic Church.
- **For Asher, a Baptist pastor** who has begun studying theological history, is realizing how Catholic the early Church was and is struggling with all that it would mean were he to leave his ministry and Christian connections to become Catholic.
- **For Jack, a Presbyterian seminarian** who has become convinced that he may need to become Catholic; that the Holy Spirit will give him courage as he leaves seminary and begins to consider what he will do with his life if he isn't going to be a pastor.
- **For Jake, a young evangelical associate pastor** who has become convinced over the past months that he needs to become Catholic; that the Holy Spirit will lead him as he resigns his position and begins to rethink his future.
- **For Samuel, a former Protestant minister** who has led his family into the Church, is seeking the Lord's will for his future and considering pursuing doctoral work in Catholic biblical studies.
- **For Samuel, a Calvary Chapel pastor** convinced that he needs to become Catholic and just beginning to face the tremendous obstacles in his path.
- **For Julian, a Lutheran pastor** who is studying the case for Catholicism and finding himself drawn toward the Church; that the Holy Spirit will continue to lead him.
- **For Scott, a Church of Christ pastor** who has been reading the Catechism of the Catholic Church and finds himself intrigued, and yet who has many questions; that the Lord will lead him as he continues his studies.
- **For Will, a Protestant chaplain** who has become Catholic and needs desperately to find a new means of employment
- **For Sam, a Baptist minister** struggling to find a way to lead his wife and three children into the Church while still wrestling with some theological questions.
- **For James, a Foursquare minister** who wants to become Catholic while leading a family that is happy where they are and has no interest.

Laity

- **For Denise, an Evangelical,** For unity in faith in her family.
- **For Shelby, a Baptist,** for a receptive heart and curious mind as she begins this journey, and for her family to all be united in the Catholic Church.
- **For Joyce, an Evangelical,** for relief from PTSD, for emotional well being and healing, for the ability to go to Mass daily for strength and consolation.
- **For Regina, a Lutheran,** for unity in the faith in her marriage
- **For Tracy, a Non-Denominational,** for her and her husband to have the grace they need to seek God's will in their lives. They desire the full knowledge of truth.
- **For Susan, an Assemblies of God,** for wisdom and guidance on her faith journey and for physical healing from multiple sclerosis.
- **For Elizabeth, a Catholic,** for family unity in the faith. For graces to endure the loneliness she feels at times by becoming Catholic without her husband.
- **For Amy, a Non-Denominational,** for new employment for her husband and for healing and good health for her aunt and Father-in-law.
- **For Eileen, a Catholic,** for her husband's good health and relief from stress. For her to be a well of and refreshment for him.
- **For Danny, an American Baptist,** that the Holy Spirit would guide him to the one, true Church.
- **For Bradley, a Seventh-day Adventist,** that our Lord Jesus would clear away all the misinformation he has been told about the Catholic faith.
- **For Zach,** that his OCIA journey would lead him to a more deep and rich relationship with our Lord Jesus Christ.
- **For Jason, a Southern Baptist,** that he may receive straight and thoughtful answers to his questions about Catholicism.
- **For Jireh, a Pentecostal,** that the Holy Spirit would clear away his confusion and misunderstandings about Catholic faith and practices.
- **For Stephen, a Lutheran,** that he and his wife would grow in their understanding of Catholic doctrine and moral teaching.
- **For Douglas, a Seventh-day Adventist,** that our Lord Jesus would guide his OCIA experience and that his friends and family would accept his Catholic faith.
- **For Samuel, a Non-denominational Evangelical,** that he may find the answers he needs to his many questions and concerns.
- **For Zach, a Presbyterian,** that he may find understanding and acceptance of the Church teachings on the Holy Eucharist and salvation.
- **For Mike, a member of the United Church of Christ,** that the Holy Spirit would guide his journey back to the holy Catholic Church.
- **For Robert, a Lutheran,** that he may be granted the grace to respond to the call that he feels to enter the Catholic Church.
- **For David, an Anglican,** that he may discover the answers to questions and points of view from his Protestant friends.

'I appeal to you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree and that there be no dissensions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment. '

1 CORINTHIANS 1:10

THE COMING HOME NETWORK INTERNATIONAL

Introducing a new avenue for you to partner in mission with the Coming Home Network!

PROTECT YOUR FAMILY & HONOR YOUR FAITH WITH MyCatholicWill

MyCatholicWill.com/CHNetwork



Preserve what matters most to you and pass on the faith to future generations. Go to 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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The Coming Home Network International

CHNetwork

ComingHomeNetwork

The 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*.



Join our mission…

GIVINGTUESDAY

Help us bring them home!

DECEMBER 1ST IS GIVING TUESDAY!

Your support helps us walk with those who are curious about Catholicism and those on their journey home to full communion with the Catholic Church.

Your generous gift this #GivingTuesday helps us share the truth and beauty of the Catholic Church with those making the journey home!

chnetwork.org/givingtuesday

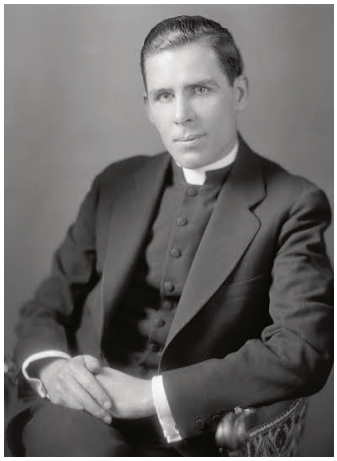
THE ONLY PERSON IN THE ROOM

by Matt Swaim

On September 24th of this year, the Catholic Church in the United States of America celebrated an extraordinary moment, as Cardinal Luis Tagle traveled from Rome to St. Louis to preside at the official beatification of Archbishop Fulton Sheen.

When his sainthood cause was opened by the Diocese of Peoria in 2002, Sheen received the title "Servant of God." After extended research into his life and writings, the Vatican recognized his heroic virtue, and so from 2012 until this September, he was known as Venerable Fulton Sheen. In the intervening years, investigation of a possible miracle involving the healing of a stillborn child resulted in Sheen being officially elevated to the next stage of the sainthood process, known as beatification; he is now recognized in the Church as Blessed Fulton J. Sheen.

In the days surrounding Sheen's beatification, I had the extraordinary opportunity to interview a number of people who have been deeply affected by his teaching and personal witness through the years, including several who have been directly connected with his sainthood cause. In the course of those conversations, one comment stood out, from a man whose parents had once had Sheen over for dinner. As he put it, even in a house full of people socializing, when you talked to Bishop Sheen, "you felt like you were the only person in the room."



That particular description of Sheen struck me, because I've heard that same kind of comment about at least two other towering figures in 20th century Catholicism. A priest friend of mine once described his encounter with Pope St. John Paul II in the same terms, and I've talked to a few people who told me separately that when they met Mother Teresa, whether at a gala or in the midst of her busy mission, they, too, felt like "the only person in the room."

How is it that these three figures—an Emmy-winning bishop, the most visible and well-traveled pope in history, and a Nobel Prize-winning religious sister—were able to be so present to the people directly in front of them? And was that just an interesting feature of their personalities, or was it an inherent part of what made them saints?

In the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, we read that by revealing Himself to Moses as "I AM," God is revealing not only His being, but also the fact that He is eternally present; "am" is a present tense state of being verb. As the Catechism puts it, by describing Himself to Moses in this way, God "reveals Himself as the God who is always there, present to His people in order to save them." (*CCC* 207) Essentially, to be fully present to someone is, in some small measure, to imitate God.

So what does this mean for those of us who want to know how to best share the truth, beauty, and goodness of our Catholic Faith with those who are not yet with us at the Lord's table?

Maybe the easiest way to frame it is to subvert a common question we get from our members. Often, Catholics who are part of our CHNetwork family will call or write, and share the story of a loved one they've been praying for and want to see come home to the Catholic Faith. And often, in those conversations, they will ask us what book they can give that person, or what episode of *The Journey Home* they should send them.

And while the resources we put together are helpful (we hope!), no book or video or airtight apologetic can replace the real, incarnational, human work of patiently loving people and being present to them. Pope Paul VI once said, "Modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses." Arguments and debates and research have their place; most of us had to do a lot of intellectual wrestling on our way into the Church! But it would be a mistake to underestimate the witnessing power of simply being truly present to someone who is seeking truth.

Numerous people were affected by the television and radio teachings of Bl. Fulton Sheen, some to the point of making the decision to explore and enter the Catholic Church. But each of those people still had to encounter someone at the local parish to disciple them, and a local pastor to give them the sacraments. And some of the best stories about the seekers Sheen helped into the Church are the ones about the people he met with privately and personally discipled.

That is why, for me, some of the most rewarding work we do at the Coming Home Network is in the hidden ministry of Pastoral Care, where an inquirer who is at a difficult stage in their journey can connect directly with someone like Ken Hensley, Jim Anderson, Melissa Slagle, or someone else from our staff or CHNetwork community who can address their concerns privately and with the attention they deserve. Each new person who reaches out to us provides us with a fresh opportunity to take up the challenge of Fulton Sheen, of John Paul II, and of Mother Teresa; to treat yet another soul on the journey as the only person in the room.

Bl. Fulton Sheen, pray for us!

create us in the first place if He didn't have a plan or purpose for our lives?

If God created us for a purpose, I instinctively knew His purpose for my life was not for me to be a drunkard and an irresponsible husband and father. From that time on, my craving to be drunk faded away.

Sobriety

My New Year's resolution was to give up drinking—easier said than done. I understood that being drunk was not what God wanted for me, but after a dozen years of drinking almost every day, it was hard to go cold turkey. At that point in my life, I felt comfortable when I was drunk. Being sober made me feel anxious and uneasy. After four or five days of not drinking, I was getting very uncomfortable.

A week or so after New Year's Day, I was in my office at the end of the day. Everyone had left, and I was getting ready to lock up and go home. But I felt so uncomfortable, the urge was strong to go to happy hour at some bar.

Impulsively, I opened a desk drawer and pulled out a phone book to look up the number for an organization that helps alcoholics who want to be anonymous about it. I made the call, and a pleasant man answered. I then uttered possibly the greatest understatement in world history. I said, "I think I *might* have a *little* problem with alcohol." That's like saying, "I think the Federal Government *might* have a *little* national debt."

The man told me a meeting would be taking place in about an hour at a nearby church basement, and he very nicely encouraged me to attend. Looking back, it had to be the Holy Spirit who prompted me to grab that phone book and make the call.

Going to that meeting was such a blessing. For the first time in my adult life, I learned – and embraced – the idea that it is okay not to drink. I know that sounds silly, but I was raised to believe that enjoying alcoholic beverages was required to be happy and enjoy a full life. When I stood up and said for the first time, "My name is Bill, and I'm an alcoholic," it was like a big weight lifted off my shoulder. It was similar to the experience I had a few days earlier, when I looked at the little plastic Jesus in the creche and realized He really is who people say He is. Both moments were such a relief, admitting that I couldn't make it on my own and needed help.

After attending those meetings regularly for a few months, there was a time when a middle-aged man stood up to say a few words. He said, "Some people say that Jesus can do miracles. They say He once changed water into wine. Well, I don't know nothin' about that—it wasn't like I was there, y'know. But I do know that He changed wine into bread, and into furniture, and into rent money, and into love. He changed a bum into a man. He changed a loser into a daddy. And that's a pretty fine miracle if you ask me."

Immediately, I identified with his words. Even though I had been sober for only a short period of time, I could tell something miraculous was happening to me because of Jesus. Now, over four decades later, I still identify with that man's words. And I still thank Jesus for changing me from a bum into a man. What a blessing!

At those meetings, I met a young man who also was working hard to stay sober. He and his wife recently joined a fundamentalist Baptist congregation. I spent a lot of time talking with them, and they helped me learn a lot about the Gospel message and Scripture. I will always have a fond place in my heart for all of our separated brethren in the Evangelical communities.

There was one time, though, that felt a little awkward. I was over at my friend's house one Saturday morning after a meeting. The two of us and his wife were reading the Bible and talking about faith. Suddenly, my friend's wife blurted out, "Oh Bill, isn't it so wonderful that you're going to Heaven!" Then, without even pausing to take a breath, she continued, "But, Bill, isn't it so sad that your wife is going to Hell because she's a Catholic?!"

At this point, I had no idea if what she said was true or not. It had been so long since I had thought about religious doctrines. I had never paid attention to the nuns in catechism class, so I was a blank slate. I didn't know anything—other than God was real and the story about Jesus struck a chord in my heart—but I was eager to learn as much as I could about Christianity. Unfortunately, my ignorance caused me to wonder if that woman's claim about Catholics going to Hell might be true.

At that time in my life, I was perfectly content to join my friend's faith community and be part of that independent Baptist group. But my wife, who also was raised Catholic but never lost her faith completely, as I did, was not comfortable with that plan. (Maybe learning that folks were certain she was going to Hell just because she's Catholic might have turned her off a bit.) Instead, we started going to Catholic Mass together, though I went as an unofficial, undercover Protestant. I focused on the Liturgy of the Word, because my Baptist friends taught me the Bible is divinely inspired (which is true), and they taught me the Bible is all we need to live holy, Christian lives (which is not).

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*)

When it was time for the Liturgy of the Eucharist, I kind of zoned out. I was convinced the second half of Mass was a stale ritual added on to true worship by some sneaky popes during the Middle Ages. I accepted what my Baptist friends taught me: all the traditions and rituals added by the Catholic Church over the years were like barnacles on a boat. The Protestant Reformation scraped off those useless and idolatrous barnacles so people could once again worship purely and properly.

I also did a lot of reading during this time, along with listening to Christian radio stations. Some of my favorites were Charles Colson, Steve Brown, Chuck Swindoll, Max Lucado, and of course, Billy Graham. My faith was growing. I was staying sober. Our family life had done a complete 180 and now was heading in the right direction. I had finally landed a good and steady job, and we had another daughter. There was no doubt that I had a genuine and powerful relationship with the Lord Jesus, which had completely changed the course of my life. Things were going well, and in the interest of family harmony, I continued to attend Mass rather than demand that our family join some Evangelical community.

Eucharist is the Key

Soon after, I discovered books written by Scott Hahn, Karl Keating, Tim Staples, and a few others—many of whom were former Protestant ministers who had become Catholic. They presented a much different picture of the Catholic Church than I was getting from my Baptist friends.

The key for me was learning the true story of the Eucharist. I had been told for years the claim that bread and wine turn into the real Body and Blood of Jesus was invented by some medieval pope as a devious scheme to wield more power over the laity. Are you familiar with Jack Chick comic book tracts? I had read them often. Now, I started reading some of the early Church Fathers and discovered they all believed in the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist from the very beginning of Christianity.

Back then I owned a massive volume of some kind of Bible resource book. It went through the entire Bible, verse by verse, with detailed explanations of everything. I turned to John Chapter 6 to read this Protestant publication's explanation of the chapter those Catholic authors claimed was the most Eucharistic teaching in Scripture. I was stunned to see the book completely glossed over it. After having at least a page and a half explaining John, Chapter 5, the book said something like this: "In John, Chapter 6, Jesus teaches that bread symbolizes his body."

And that was it! It immediately went on to discuss John, Chapter 7. That was a real eye-opener. It told me that very intelligent Evangelical scholars were afraid to describe the obvious Eucharistic message in John 6, probably worried they would come across as "too Catholic."

When I attended Mass, I stopped zoning out during the Liturgy of the Eucharist, and started paying attention. I silently asked myself, *Is this real? Can God really change mere bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Jesus?* The answer was obvious: of course God can! He designed and created life; He raised Jesus from the dead. Therefore, does God have the power to work a miracle on the altar during Mass? Certainly He does!

That was the turning point for me. I came to understand that Jesus founded a single Church, and His one Church has been preaching the Gospel throughout the world for over 2,000 years. I love my Evangelical friends, and I'm convinced that if a person has even a little bit of Jesus, he or she has a whole lot of Jesus, which is a wonderful thing. But the Catholic Church has been entrusted with the full deposit of faith. And most importantly, the Church has the real Body, Blood, Soul, and Divinity of Jesus Christ right in its midst, and *right inside of us* when we consume the Eucharist at Mass.

When I came to believe in my heart of hearts that Jesus is truly present in the Eucharist, that was the last time I thought about joining an Evangelical community. I knew I was home. I knew I was worshipping in the exact place God wanted me to worship. As I came to understand the importance of the sacraments, I finally went to Confession (Reconciliation) for the first time in decades. It was amazing; I felt like a weight was lifted off my shoulders.

Some years later, I published a book titled, *The Gospel According to Morty*. It's a collection of short stories and essays. One of the sections is called, "Is the Real Presence Really Real?" I quoted 15 different Church Fathers, from the 2nd century through the 5th century, and they all taught—firmly and forcefully—that mere bread and wine truly become the Body and Blood of Jesus at every Mass.

In the many years since all this occurred, I've led Bible studies in a couple of different parishes, written three books about faith, and recorded for the local Catholic radio station a weekly spot titled, "The Merry Catholic."

I recently saw a meme online that sums up my story: "I know Jesus is real because I've seen the difference between me *with Him* and me *without Him*." Amen. ■

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