

The Coming Home Network International

JULY 2007 NEWSLETTER

Journeys Home

Torah, Tolkien, and a Kansas Farm Boy

by Matthew Umbarger

C.S. Lewis described his journey into faith as being “Surprised by Joy.” I believe that my own journey into the Catholic Church could perhaps best be summed up as “surprised by beauty.” Growing up on a farm, I was exposed to the beauty of God’s creation almost simultaneously with my birth. Strangely, I didn’t come to fully associate beauty with God’s truth until much later.

“Just Christian”

I grew up in Thayer, Kansas, attending the local Christian Church. The truth, as it was presented in my church, included a handful of distinctives which were settled upon by the early “Disciples of Christ.” The Reformation didn’t go far enough according to the founders of our movement. One of them, Thomas Campbell, described their work as “this present reformation.” They believed that they had discovered the apostolic pattern in Scripture, and were bound to restore it to the Church. This apostolic pattern, primarily based on their readings of the Book of Acts, consisted primarily of the following:

1. Believers’ baptism: in other words, adult baptism and its necessity.
2. Presbyterian ecclesiology: A number of elders and deacons preside in every church. These are elected. There is no hierarchical structure beyond the local church.
3. Weekly communion.
4. No name but Christian: They expected all the other churches to drop their names and join them. We prided ourselves on being “Just Christians.” Of course, this meant that for the most part we only associated with other “Just Christians.”



Eventually this lent itself to a very self-righteous type of Christianity. We really believed that we had it right, and everyone else had it wrong. We were defined by our differences with everyone else. Our mission was to get everyone into our particular church.

One of the results of this kind of teaching for me was that I grew to distrust any religious expression that — no matter how beautiful or seemingly doctrinally sound — looked in any way different from that with which I was familiar. A well-formed liturgy was especially suspicious. I learned early in my life to disdain prayer by rote. Prayer was supposed to be Spirit-led and spontaneous. In our church, the liturgy was stark and simple.

Hell-Fire and Hobbits

When I was seven years old, three very important things happened to me. First, my aunt and uncle invited me to a

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vacation Bible school at their Bible Baptist Church. The preacher there told us all that we were damned. I can still remember him putting before us a litany of things which would send you to hell, one of which was listening to Michael Jackson! We were all going to hell. But if we said the “Sinner’s Prayer,” we could get out of it. Of course, I was mortified. So, I had a meeting with him and said the Sinner’s Prayer. But it was really difficult for me to believe that just saying these “magic words” was going to change the Creator’s mind about me. Seven year olds aren’t stupid. He’d convinced me that God wanted to send me to Hell. How was I supposed to believe that, all of a sudden, just repeating a few words after the preacher was going to make that all right?

So I went home and talked to my pastor. He said, “Of course it’s not all right. You have to get baptized.” So I was baptized. It was not a joyful event for me, as I remember it. I just didn’t want to go to hell.

All of this really confused me. We sang “Jesus loves me,” but then were told that if we made one false move, we were toast. Christianity was basically about escaping hell. The beauty of heaven was not about being in the presence of the God who loves us, but about getting to home-base so that we couldn’t be condemned by Him. I worried constantly. If I knew that I had done something wrong, I would worry that I was going to hell, and was actually afraid that God was going to do something to kill me to send me there! I had learned more about God’s wrath than His compassion.

Fortunately, there were other things awaiting me that summer which were much sweeter than this morbid VBS. I was a voracious reader. My mother gave me a Bible at my baptism, and I began to read it straight through. I did this because I wanted to get out of hell, and we’d been told that Christians need to read their Bible. I took them seriously. Even though I began to read out of fear, I nonetheless fell in love with the Scriptures. By the time that I was ten, I had read the Bible (Protestant) through at least once.

Second, an aunt who was very impressed with my reading abilities loaned me her set of J.R.R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings*. I devoured them. That, I believe,

had more than anything else to do with my becoming Catholic some twenty years later. The reason is, I could sense that there was a beauty and a spirituality in those books that was shared with the Scriptures I was reading. I could also sense that this spirituality was richer and more authentic than that which I was receiving in my church. Unfortunately, at that stage in my life, that just made me feel guilty about having such thoughts.

Tolkien’s Dirty Secret

As I got older, I discovered the writings of Tolkien’s good friend, C.S. Lewis. I read *The Chronicles of Narnia*, and then began to read his other writings. When I was fourteen or so, I began to read his non-fiction, and that is probably where I began to step out of my denominational construct. I believe *Mere Christianity* began to really

heal those old hurts I received at that VBS. I began to understand not just what the Bible said, but what it meant, and it meant something grander than I had ever imagined. It meant that God wanted me for a son, and wanted to transplant His very identity into me to achieve that.

But I had a huge problem. I was being fed spiritual food by someone from a church (Anglican) that most people in my own church didn’t even consider to be Christian! In the end, I chose Lewis. That was the first time that I shook off a bit of what I’d been taught to believe.

My next big step was to buy a book called the *Tolkien Reader*. It contained some odds and ends that Tolkien wrote. Most importantly, it contained his beautiful essay on fairy tales. At the very end of the essay, Tolkien said something quite stirring. He wrote that the Gospel is the most beautiful fairy tale of all, because it’s the only one that is completely true. I knew at last that Tolkien’s spirituality was Christian! A few months later, I found out that not only was he Christian, but he was Catholic. Moreover, he was partly responsible for Lewis’s conversion to Christianity from atheism. I was flabbergasted. How could this be? Everyone knew that Catholics aren’t really Christians!

But there it was. Tolkien had helped bring C.S. Lewis to Christ. Moreover, something rang true about his spirituality. It was like the Bible. I didn’t know what to do with all of this, but I at least accepted that, wonder of wonders, there were authentic Christians in the Catholic

continued on page 4 . . .

St. Ignatius of Loyola: God's Alternative to Schism.

What leads a person to initiate schism from the Church? Why would someone turn, reject the Church's authority, and walk away? There are many reasons. Many attitudes. Many occasions and situations. Many crises. Every person who has ever been credited with causing schism—with leading otherwise faithful believers out of the Church—has proffered a long list of seemingly irreconcilable and unanswerable reasons.

Perhaps they believe Psalm 11:3 is grounds enough: "If the foundations are destroyed, what are the righteous to do?" They don't like what they see happening in the Church—they don't like the changes the leadership has made—so, being "the righteous," they assume they are justified in making dramatic and drastic changes!

But "what are the righteous to do" when they just don't perceive that things are right in the Church or in their own faith? When they don't feel as if their faith is working? When the sermons aren't inspiring or explaining the Scriptures the way "I" think they should be?

What's interesting about the history of schisms from the Church is that the schismatic is often not so much driven by theological or doctrinal controversy but, as St. Ignatius of Loyola would say, "spiritual desolation." And if more schismatics listened to Ignatius, there'd be less schisms.

Besides starting the Jesuits, St. Ignatius is most known for his *Spiritual Exercises*. He also, however, wrote a lesser-known work called *The Discernment of Spirits*. In this, he seeks to help anyone discern how God is calling and leading them, as well as to discern how the enemy might be misleading them.

There's far too much depth in this work to cover in this short article, so I encourage everyone to read it (a good source is *Discernment of Spirits* by Fr. Timothy Gallagher). But for now, let's consider one particularly compelling insight from the saint.

Basically, St. Ignatius recognizes that each of us struggles

every day with the discernment between the voices of God and the voices of the enemy. Sometimes things are going well, and we sense consolation from God. Ignatius defines consolation as "every increase in faith, hope, and love, and all interior joy that invites and attracts to what is heavenly, and to the salvation of our soul, by filling it with peace and quiet in its Creator and Lord."

Sometimes, however, we feel the opposite, what Ignatius calls spiritual desolation. This he defines as "what is entirely the opposite of consolation ... darkness of soul, turmoil of spirit, inclination to what is low and earthly, restlessness arising from many disturbances which lead to lack of faith, lack of hope, and lack of love. The soul is wholly slothful, tepid, sad, and separated, as it were, from its Creator and Lord."

He's not talking here about physical or psychological pain or suffering; he's addressing the spiritual desolation each of us feels at times when, for example, we've committed ourselves to a regular morning prayer time, but after a few days, we don't feel like doing it anymore. A hoard of voices from within try to convince us that it isn't working or doesn't make a difference or isn't making us feel any closer to God.

Too often, at least to speak for myself, when I've struggled with these voices of discouragement, I assume I need to make some change, either to a different place or time or to a different resource, or

maybe even to a different technique or posture. But after reading St. Ignatius' instructions I was harshly confronted about why my solutions were usually unproductive, and also why the motives behind schismatics do not bring about the renewals they seek.

St. Ignatius stresses emphatically that when we are struggling with spiritual desolation, we must NEVER, NEVER make any change or any decision, "but remain firm and content in the resolution which guided [us] the day before." If our desolation has a physical or emotional cause, then of course we may need to make a change, but if it is spiritual, then we



St. Ignatius of Loyola

continued on next page . . .

must work against the desolation by doing the opposite of what the enemy suggests. That is, we must renew our faith and disciplines of prayer. If necessary, St. Ignatius insists, we must even double our prayer time, go to Mass more often, go to the prayer meeting and serve more generously. This will quickly defeat the bad spirit.

How would this prevent schism? Far too many of the changes instituted by schismatics were motivated by spiritual desolation. For example, behind Luther's ranting against the Church's teaching on indulgences was his own inability to feel justified, to feel that his scrupulous visits to the confessional freed him from his inescapable fear of God.

There is much more to be said here, but I particularly want to address those of you on the journey. I admit from experience that some of the motivation that drove me to reexamine my Protestant faith and consider anew the Catholic faith would qualify as "spiritual desolation." Based on St. Ignatius' advice, I should not have initiated any change or decision based on this, and I whole-heartedly agree.

There is no guarantee that making the transition from Protestantism to Catholicism will improve a Christian's prayer life or help him feel closer to God. Yes, the graces are certainly present in the sacraments, but they aren't magic. Change to the Catholic faith, which for many of us requires great sacrifice, must be made only because we believe the Catholic faith is true and that the Catholic Church is in fact the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church established by Jesus Christ in His apostles.

If right now you are drawn primarily because of what may be termed spiritual desolation, then my advice is that of St. Ignatius: do not make a change! Do not make a harsh, radical decision in an attempt to solve this spiritual struggle! Keep praying! Keep seeking Him, praying that if the change to the Catholic Church is what you must do, He will make it clear.

Sincerely in Christ,



continued from conversion story by M. Umberger on page 2

Church. There were even amazing ones who were in touch with a beauty that was almost foreign to my religious tradition.

Christian Ministry

At the end of high school, I decided to attend Ozark Christian College in Joplin, Missouri. I received a Bachelor of Theology in the Old Testament, with a minor emphasis on Greek (the education I received there is one of the best gifts bestowed upon me by the Christian Churches). I was a minister in a small country church. I planned to go to the mission field in Israel. I fell in love with a beautiful girl I met in Greek class my freshman year, and Robin and I decided to make a life together. We were ordained on Yom Kippur, 2000, a few months after my graduation.

By this time I had come even further in my acceptance of brothers and sisters from other denominational backgrounds, in particular, Catholics. Somewhere along the way, I bought a used copy of *The Book of Common Prayer*. I immediately was taken with the beautiful prayers. It made sense to me to use a lectionary, to read Scripture as *the Church*, instead of as a church. I started

to use the lectionary, even though I never told the little church in which I was preaching what I was doing. I would even slip a few prayers from the liturgy in here and there, usually modernized a bit, or memorized in such a way as to make them sound "spontaneous."

I should also mention our exposure to Natural Family Planning in the months before our marriage. Lack of space hinders me from elucidating this leg of the journey which we are able to share with many other converts. I will simply say that it became evident to us very quickly that, on this subject, the Catholic Church was right, and most of the people sitting in our own churches were wrong.

Bit by bit, beauty was laying claim to our spiritual life. The concept that truth and beauty are inseparable was already beginning to make sense. I knew God as the Author of the beauty in nature. I knew Him as the Author of the beauty I found in Scripture as well (and my exposure to biblical languages only increased this aesthetic pleasure). Why should spiritual truths not be aesthetic? Why shouldn't we care about presenting them

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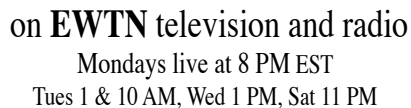
⦿ Clergy ⦿

✠ For Keith, an Anglican priest in Virginia, that the Lord may guide his heart as he seeks to understand what the Catholic Church truly teaches about Purgatory and the Pope.

✠ For Ray and his family, a former Southern Baptist minister in California who were all received into the Catholic Church this Easter.

† For Janet in Kansas.

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Advancing the Kingdom with Reverence and Awe

Friday, July 27, 2007 - Sunday, July 29, 2007

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Steubenville, OH

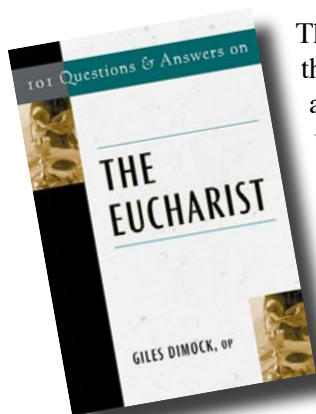
Since 1993, the *Coming Home Network International* has sponsored gatherings at the annual Defending the Faith conference. These get-togethers have provided wonderful opportunities for fellowship and putting faces with names. It also allows us to hear from you how the *CHNI* can be of better service to those on the journey as well as those who have already come home.

This year we will be sponsoring a Friday evening mixer immediately following the last conference presentation. This gathering for light refreshments and fellowship in International Lounge at the J.C. Williams Center is open to all Defending the Faith registrants. We hope to see you there!

This Month's Featured Resources

101 Questions and Answers on the Eucharist

by Giles Dimock, OP



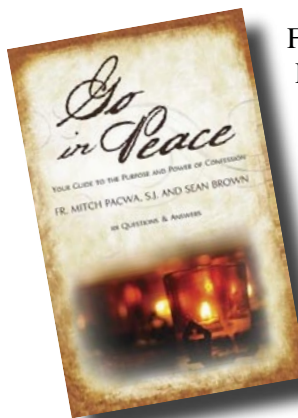
The 'source and summit' of the Christian life is at once an awesome and at times little understood element of the Catholic Faith. Indeed, it is a mystery, and is so named for a reason. But in this book, Fr. Giles Dimock attempts to put unnecessary confusion or concern aside. A must read for Catholics, and a valuable resource for those outside of

the Church who may not understand the fullness of Christ in the Eucharist, *101 Questions and Answers on the Eucharist* is a welcome addition to anyone's spiritual walk with Christ.

Go in Peace

Your Guide to the Purpose and Power of Confession

by Fr. Mitch Pacwa, S.J. and Sean Brown



Few areas of Catholic life will cause Protestants to recoil, and not a few Catholics to squirm uncomfortably in their pews, than the Sacrament of Penance. Confession, as it is commonly known, is seen by too many as a source of unneeded embarrassment, or a Catholic admission that God's forgiveness is not enough. Nothing could be further from the truth, and Fr. Mitch Pacwa and Sean Brown set for in *Go in*

Peace to alleviate the anxiety, confusion, and misunderstandings that have come to obscure one of the most wonderful gifts given to the Church by God; the gift of absolution.

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in a manner in concert with their beauty? Most disturbing of all was the realization that while my movement had produced one president (Garfield) and a number of great preachers, not a single recognized poet, writer, or visual artist had emerged from our ranks. I was beginning to have difficulties feeling at home.

The Beauty of Judaism

In our preparation for the move to Israel, we started going to a Reformed Jewish temple. There we fell in love with liturgy. We found that it drew us into worship in a way we had never experienced. Once again, this produced intense feelings of guilt. I often felt that I could worship God more easily with these Jewish people and their rote prayers than in the little country church where I was leading the worship service!

I used the excuse of “cultural preparation” to indulge my growing infatuation with Jewish tradition. For our first Christmas together, my wife got a “hanukiyah,” the special Hanukkah candlestick. I learned the prayers which attended the lighting of the candles, and we celebrated Christmas and Hanukkah together. I made “Haman’s ears” for Purim, and gave some to a Jewish philosophy professor. Messianic Judaism was also appealing, but a bit bewildering, because of all of the disagreement about the importance of Jewish tradition (many Messianic Jews, especially in Israel, treat Jewish tradition with the same disdain that Evangelicals display towards Christian tradition, while others tend towards the other extreme and make certain traditions a sort of litmus test of authentic spirituality).

Israel

On January 1, 2002 we arrived in Beer-Sheva, Israel, with our daughter. We were supported by the churches in which we had grown up. Our purpose was to build up an existing Messianic-Jewish congregation in Beer-Sheva. I also began a Master’s program in the Department of Bible and the Ancient Near East at Ben-Gurion University of the Negev.

An Unexpected Discovery

While in Beer-Sheva, a number of extremely important developments occurred. We learned Hebrew and grew to love Israel. The Lord bestowed upon us a second child,

our first son. Most dramatic, however, was our discovery of the Catholic Church.

As I learned more and more about Judaism, I was struck by the numerous parallels I found between it and Catholicism, and more profoundly by the lack of contact between my own religious tradition, and even that of the Messianics, with traditional Judaism. This presented a huge problem for me, because I still believed that the Catholic Church had basically taken Jewish Christianity and messed it all up with ‘pagan stuff.’ What I was finding was that Catholicism was Jewish to the core. A few of these parallels I found in liturgy: a hierarchy established through sacramental ordination, with a succession going back to the fathers, prayer to saints, praying for the dead, and sacred tradition.

One instance of correspondence between Judaism and Catholicism is particularly beautiful to me now. When you step into any synagogue, your attention is drawn to what is called the *aron*, or “ark.” It is there that the Torah scroll is kept. Jewish worshippers pray in the direction of the ark, and do reverence to the scroll when it is brought out. Indeed, it is the scroll which sanctifies the synagogue and distinguishes it from any other building. It is as though the scroll signifies for them the presence of God (the word “ark,” deliberately harks back to the Ark of the Covenant). Of course, when I began to understand Catholic architecture, the parallels between the ark and the tabernacle were obvious. Instead of a scroll, Catholics have the Word Made Flesh residing in their places of worship.

Such revelations caused me to do an honest study of the structure and beliefs of the earliest Church, and I approached the Apostolic Fathers for help. It was impossible to ignore the Catholic appearance that they depicted. I then went back to the New Testament and started reading it over with this new perspective. All of a sudden, the old arguments began to crumble. For instance, it wasn’t so clear to me that an infant shouldn’t be baptized after all.

The old proof texts, like Acts 2:38, seemed forced. I started to see things I’d never seen before. For instance, in Acts 1, when Peter tells the Apostles that they must choose someone to fill Judas’ position. He calls that position, usually translated “office” in English Bibles, an episcopate in the original Greek, or a bishopric. It’s right there, apostolic succession in the first chapter of Acts. I

“A Studio is Born”

Then...



Carlos Caso-Rosendi, Ann Moore, and Laura Nicholson survey the progress.



Marcus Grodi, Jim Anderson, and Carlos Caso-Rosendi prepare to host the *Deep in Scripture* radio show from the ‘almost’ finished studio set.

That we
might
proclaim the
fullness of
Christ...



“Busy little bees”...

Bill Bateson and Steve Smeltzer work on the technological systems needed to bring the studio to life.

and Now...



Thank you all for your prayers, support, and encouragement as we continually strive to bring the truth of God’s Word and the story of His Church to those who would open their hearts to His leading.

“The King will reply, ‘I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.’ Matthew 25:40 NIV

read through the Pastoral Epistles again and saw that the same thing was going on there. Timothy and Titus had been ordained by Paul as bishops to ordain others in Ephesus and Crete. Early Christians, in contrast to the churches I'd grown up in, didn't have elections.

The most thrilling element of these discoveries for me was the aesthetic confirmation of these truths. With each new understanding there was an appreciation of God's beauty, and the beauty of His works, that I had yet to discover. I was discovering that Catholicism had the right "scent" about it. My heart had been prepared for this by Tolkien and the Reformed temple in Joplin.

The deciding factor for us, however, was the desperate need for Christian unity in Beer-Sheva. Christians are a minority in Israel. In Beer-Sheva, a city with a population of 180,000 or so, there are somewhere around 500 Christians. These are divided amongst several congregations, and these congregations have little or nothing to do with one another. We were moved to visit the Catholic congregation in town "to see if there were any Christians there." We were welcomed to fellowship there with love and joy, and were moved by the deep faith displayed by that little church. We began to attend on a semi-regular basis.

I felt that the Lord was calling us into a deeper, more challenging relationship with His Church, and I began to do serious research on Catholicism. I discovered late one night the website for *The Coming Home Network International*, and I began to receive materials from them in the mail. One day, when a box of books arrived for me, my wife asked me where I had gotten them. Up to this point I had not yet summoned up enough courage to raise the possibility with her of actually becoming Catholic. I opened the box, handed her a book entitled *Journeys Home*, and suggested that she read this book that a person I had "met online" had sent to me. She came to me a few days later asking me, "Are we going to become Catholic, or what?"

A Difficult Decision

Were we going to become Catholic, or what? I repeated the question over and over again before the Lord one cold, windy day as I trudged the two kilometers from our home to the University campus. I said, "Jesus, if we become Catholic, this could really mess a lot of things up in our life. We could lose all of our support."

I heard the Lord speak into my heart, "Do you love Me more than your support?"

"But Jesus, if we lose our support, we may have to return home!"

"Do you love Me more than living in Israel?"

"But what will all of our family say?"

"Do you love Me more than your family?"

As I propped up each obstacle, I was confronted by Jesus' call to love Him and follow Him into difficulty.

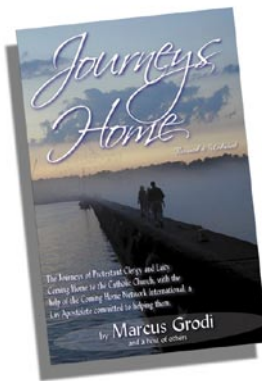
Catholic!

On November 27, 2004, my wife Robin and I received confirmation, and our children were baptized. It was the thrilling conclusion of an exhilarating faith journey.

Since then, many of our fears have been confirmed. Life has been difficult on a number of levels. However, ours is a beauty that we grow deeper into from one day to the next. "For a day in thy courts is better than a thousand elsewhere!"

Currently Matthew is finishing a doctorate in the Bible department of Ben-Gurion University of the Negev in Beer-Sheva, Israel. He and his family have joined Plowman Ministries, Inc., a Catholic lay ministry dedicated to intercession for Israel and giving encouragement to those living there (contact www.plowmanministries.com if you would like to know more about this ministry).

With each new understanding there was an appreciation of God's beauty, and the beauty of His works, that I had yet to discover.



The Coming Home Network International has fine-tuned, revised, and reissued this 442-page inspiring collection **over 33 conversion stories** of CHNetwork members. If you have ever wondered why someone would enter the Catholic Church, this helpful resource will explain the reasons through the eyes of those who have made the journey. *Journeys Home* is a must read for anyone looking at the abundant blessings offered by fellowship and worship within the one, historic Catholic Faith.

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