

The *Coming Home Network* *International*

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Journeys Home

UPON THE ROCK

BY RICH SOWDER

FORMER ORTHODOX PRESBYTERIAN

By the grace of God, I discovered that in order to find the Real Presence upon the Rock, one must travel the road that leads to Rome. Orthodox Presbyterians are not frequently found traveling this road. A fallen and broken clergyman is about the only kind of Orthodox Presbyterian one would expect to find along this way. Here is the story of such a man's journey – the account of my finding the Real Presence upon the Rock.

Born in 1953, I was raised by parents who had left farms in Kentucky to find industrial work in the north. My three sisters, one brother, and I grew up doing farm chores and playing in the countryside of Montgomery County near Dayton, Ohio. Our mother, Elva, never met a person she considered a stranger and could make the best butterscotch pies on earth. Our father, Manford, was a master machinist of the metal lathe and was devoted to prayer. We attended the Church of God in Farmland, Indiana, where perfectionism and faith healing became a dominant focus in our lives.

Then, in 1980, tragedy struck our family. At the age of 67, due to a deliberate avoidance of medical care, my Mom died a premature death. Then, in 1994, needing medical attention for his eyes but clinging to the same false promises of faith healing, my Dad went totally blind. While youth in general tend to rebel against their parents' religion, I believe false teachings and their consequences made it particularly difficult for the members of our family as we struggled to find our way to a healthy expression of the Faith.

At age 23, I had a conversion experience, and it was not to be my only one. My studies in anthropology at Wright State University in Dayton had enticed me to sample a variety of belief systems. Then the Lord sent David Schultz my way. When this dear friend confronted me with the fact that I was committing idolatry and that the one true and

living God is the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, I instantly gave my heart back to the Triune God in whose Name I had been baptized when I was ten years old. This marked the wonderful beginning of my adult experience as a Christian. If only I had been allowed to mature before being thrust into a leadership position!

Within a year I was teaching the adult Sunday school class at a Grace Brethren Church. Distressed by their easy-believism, I found my way to a Plymouth Brethren Assembly. After learning more about ecclesiology and accepting the truth of infant baptism, I joined the Orthodox Presbyterian Church in 1980 where, within another year or so, I was taken under care of the Presbytery of Ohio and began seminary.

I graduated from the Reformed Presbyterian Theological Seminary in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, with a Master of Divinity degree. Soon after I was ordained in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church. The seven years I spent as a Protestant Minister of the Word were marked by tireless study, love of preaching, and joy in instructing youth and adults. My ministry was well received, but pride was setting me up for a fall.

INSIDE THIS ISSUE

<i>Can I Trust My Conscience?by Marcus Grodi.....</i>	<i>page A</i>
<i>The Catholic Answer and Where the Primaries Are.....</i>	<i>page B</i>
<i>Bulletin Board</i>	<i>page C</i>
<i>Prayer List</i>	<i>page D</i>



My first pastorate at Grace Orthodox Presbyterian Church in Lansing, Michigan, ended when the Presbytery dissolved my pastoral relation with the congregation due to a conflict between the local leadership and myself. My second pastorate in the Orthodox Christian Reformed Church of Bowmanville, Ontario, ended when the Consistory deposed me for another conflict with the local leadership. My third pastorate at Nashua Orthodox Presbyterian Church near New Castle, Pennsylvania, came to an end in 1991 when I resigned, full of disillusionment with the ministry and with myself – but not nearly disillusioned enough with myself. Sufficient disillusionment with myself was not to come for ten more years.

The years between 1991 and 2001 were very dark years. I stopped going to church and lived more or less incognito regarding my status as a minister with everyone I worked with or met. First as a truck driver, then as a cabinetmaker apprentice, next as a carpenter's helper, and finally as a property supervisor – no one was aware of my clerical past. This was but the manifestation on the outside of the denial I was experiencing on the inside. I was living in flagrant violation of my ordination vows. I had deserted my last flock and refused to take the blame for the conflicts at my first and second charges. Just as St. Paul warned in I Timothy 3:6, having been elevated as an immature Christian to the pastorate, because of my pride, I fell into the devil's punishment.

With my fall came years of inward torment. In desperation, I attempted to find a way of damming the source of my condemnation. I gladly fell prey to the writings of a minister who had similarly flunked out of the "institutional church". In 1999, I sold my home near Dayton, Ohio, and moved with my family to Jacksonville, Florida, to become a part of "Church Life" – a house church assault upon the "institutional church". Such approaches to Christ champion the individual and the individual's church, throwing derision and contempt at the historic faith. To them, the Church of the ages is nothing more than a worn out artifact, based on pagan idolatry and superstition.

But God mercifully intervened. In 2001, in another conversion experience, I realized how deep I had descended into error. The stony heart I had hardened against my Christian brothers in the so-called institutional church melted with love. I joyfully submitted to the love of God and drove 3400 miles during a 19-day pilgrimage of repentance to the three churches I had served between 1984 and 1991. I wrote letters ahead of time confessing my sins and asking if I could visit. I was received with open arms, shed many tears, and experienced a deep and powerful healing. How wonderful it has been to be restored to the friendship of these beautiful people of God.

But the error of my ways had produced more than broken relationships. It also entailed a departure from the Truth.

Love and Truth do not vie for primacy. They are essentially one in God Himself and necessarily interdependent if we are to be godly. Therefore, the grace of God enabled me not only to repudiate the schismatic practices of the house church movement, but also to renounce its heretical teachings, particularly those of the radical leaders in that movement.

Although ordained a Presbyterian minister in 1984, resigning in 1991, and then returning as a layman in 2001, I languished as my Protestant roots could not reach down deep enough into the soil of the faith for the healing I needed. I was unable to re-connect with where I had been disconnected. This applied not only to objective dogmatic issues, but also to the subjective experience of spirituality.

The error into which I had fallen by involvement with the house church movement had hurt me spiritually. In order to recover from this spiritual error, I had to become more deeply rooted in the Faith. It was no longer enough for me to grasp intellectually the solutions to my theological problems. My repentance cried out for something deeper than Protestant *sola fide*, or faith alone, for my soul's cure. Yes, the Protestant doctrine of faith alone appears at first to be a promise too good to be true. All you must do is believe, though that is rather vaguely defined. Say a prayer, accept Jesus, and you are off to heaven. But as promises that are too good to be true can sometimes be too good to be true, this one was as well. For all you have is an insurance policy, spelled out in vocal affirmation, and left to rely solely on inner subjective feelings and emotions. In the end, what appeared to be the ultimate gift turned out to be lacking in substance, in depth, or quite frankly, in Biblical truth.

After all, where was this life long journey toward salvation which is spoken of by Paul, that we are to work out in fear and trembling (Philippians 2:12)? Where was this Church, built upon a Rock that Jesus would be lead by the Holy Spirit into all truth (John 16:13)? And where was that Body and Blood, that very food of life with which we were called on by the Savior to partake with and fellowship (John 6, 1 Cor 10:16)? Certainly it becomes apparent that as initially appealing as a prayer to Jesus and "once saved, always saved" may be, it begins to crumble in the face of even superficial study of Scripture.

If the Protestant approach – which focuses on a subjective acceptance of truths, based on nothing more than a momentary prayer – was to give inner peace, it seemed to be failing. Likewise, if this was no truth at all, but rather a shard of what the entire Gospel given once and for all to the saints truly presented, then it was worth the while to seek out and find what might be missing from this quick and easy approach to the most important eternal truths in the universe.

continued on page 3...

Can I Trust My Conscience?

In the sixteenth century two celebrated spiritual leaders, Martin Luther and St. Thomas More, stood on opposite sides of the religious debates of their day. Ironically, they took their stand on the same principle: an appeal to conscience.

Luther died outside the Catholic Church because he claimed that his conscience compelled him to oppose the Church. More died a martyr because he insisted that his conscience forbade him to oppose the Church.

Today the cry to stand on conscience, especially with regard to socially contentious issues, is heard more and more among Catholics and others as well. Yet just as it was in the time of Luther and More, the conclusions drawn according to individual conscience are often contradictory. How is it, then, that trusting one's conscience seems both perennially essential and dangerously unreliable?

Consider this analogy. I'm 6' 4." Most people consider me tall, but in my mind's eye I'm just average height. In fact, whenever I encounter others of my height, I think of them as taller than I am.

For most of my life, you see, my normal line of vision has tilted down as I look into the faces of family and friends. What seems, then, to be "level" or "normal" in my mind is skewed slightly downward.

My perception of height is thus not objectively accurate, but instead rather subjective, relative to my experience. If I had spent my life with mostly taller people or mostly shorter people, I would probably have become accustomed either way to think of myself, in my mind's eye, as their height.

Given this situation, if I were to stand before a large mirror alongside others, I'd be surprised at what appears there. No doubt I would then look around for a reliable measuring instrument, some kind of yardstick, to determine accurately how my height compares objectively to that of the others. Only then could I correct that warped lifelong perception of myself and others.

In a similar way, the perception of right and wrong that we call our conscience can become untrustworthy. Over the years, it tends to adjust to the world around us, in ways to which we are dangerously blind. Sometimes our conscience bends to be more like those whom we admire or who admire us. Sometimes it bends away from those whom we despise or who despise us.

Either way, our conscience ends up skewed in ways we don't recognize. The Scripture recognizes this problem when it

speaks of consciences that are "weak," "wounded," "branded" or "tainted" (see 1 Cor 8:7-12; 1 Ti 4:2; Titus 1:15).

So how do we gain a trustworthy conscience, a vision of right and wrong that is accurate? Most people are unwilling to examine and correct their consciences until they become aware, through direct confrontation with another person's conscience or some other "Aha!" experience, that "there's something wrong with this picture!" Such an experience is like standing before the mirror.

Having recognized the problem, we must regularly examine and form our conscience by using a reliable moral "yardstick" — an objective means of measuring what is right and wrong. But practically speaking, what kind of yardstick is available?

Luther claimed that we must use Scripture alone to form conscience. But we need only observe the chaos of Christian opinions on critical moral issues to see that Luther's sola Scriptura principle has proven perpetually untrustworthy as a means of forming conscience. Merely private scriptural interpretation is simply too subjective.

Others say that the best way to form conscience is to ask "WWJD?" or "What would Jesus do?" Yet this approach can be just as subjective and shaky as sola Scriptura. We need the living voice of Christ in His Church, speaking into our contemporary situation and addressing our moral concerns.

Rather than asking, "What would Jesus do?" we should ask, "What did Jesus do?" What did He do to provide us with an objective means to measure truth and form a faithful conscience?

The answer, of course, is that He gave us as a trustworthy yardstick "the Church of the living God, the pillar and foundation of truth" (1 Tim 3:15). If we make it a habit to study and embrace the Church's precepts, and all the authoritative moral teachings of her Magisterium, we'll form a conscience on which we can confidently take our stand.



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continued from page 2...

It took an Episcopalian interlude, and a serious glance at Orthodoxy, for me to finally embrace what the Lord was teaching me from Holy Scripture and from Sacred Tradition: the primacy of the Bishop of Rome and the centrality of the Holy Eucharist. It was here that the call to the Sacraments, the journey of a Faith based on the roots laid by the Savior Himself, and the true intimacy that comes with partaking in the Real Presence of Christ finally came together.

Of course, for so many Protestants, there seems no greater hurdle over which they must leap to return to the Catholic Church than the primacy of the Pope. But after all, as Protestants we place a great deal of respect and trust in the authority of our respective church leaders. And when they proclaim God's truth, we don't imagine them making it up as they go, but assume they are speaking as ones with authority – authority founded on the Gospel of Christ. So how much less difficult should it be for us to realize that for Catholics, the Pope as head of the Catholic Church, in a way similar to pastors who head individual churches, is merely fulfilling a duty that any Protestant who accepts an ordained authority figure of the Gospel must accept. And this makes sense, for it is the singular leadership of a church father, in the manner of Peter, that has kept the Church together, through tough times and through the good.

As for the Holy Eucharist, it is a point in which we can return and be present with Jesus, in a way that the first apostles experienced Him in the upper room all those years ago. While no Protestant would deny the inner presence of Jesus in our hearts, the modern spiritual ideal has caused many to accept the ideal that He can only be present subjectively, in us. Instead, through the Eucharist, he is truly there, in Body, Mind, and Spirit. He is fully present, before us, offering Himself up to us as he did on the night in which He was betrayed, handing Himself over as His Body, His Blood. It is really quite beautiful. If only our Protestant brothers and sisters could stop and consider the intimacy. For while we always have Jesus in us, through the Eucharist, we have Jesus truly present with us, giving us strength, faith, and unity; things sorely missing in so many modern approaches to the historic Faith.

After a year of study – and listening to WQOP, the local EWTN radio station – my family and I made our first visit to our local Parish, Blessed Trinity Catholic Church, in May 2003. Their RCIA program gained all 5 members of my household for Catholic formation. On Easter 2004, my wife Kathy – such a faithful companion on this journey which we have shared together – our daughters Carolyn and Debbie, my 91-year-old father, Manford, and I received the Sacrament of Confirmation. In 2005, we relocated to spend the remaining months of Dad's life with his youngest daughter, my sister Carolyn. It was so thrilling to have fallen in love with the Church together with my Dad. May God rest

his soul. Our new Parish, which was such a blessing to Dad in life and in death, is St. Anthony of the Desert Maronite Catholic Church of El Paso, Texas.

Becoming Catholic is such an intellectually and spiritually exhilarating experience. We used to be so prejudiced against the Roman Catholic Church. In our day and age, it is easy to do. Much was recently made of the *Da Vinci Code*, but the truth is, such popular tripe has long been a staple in our societal attitudes regarding the Catholic Church. Some Protestant literature quite frankly is far worse than Dan Brown's celebrated tirade. But in the midst of all of this, if the Catholic Church is given a chance, it shines through the deceptions and the falsehoods that are so easy to accept.

But now it all makes perfect sense: The Rock of Peter and the Real Presence of Jesus constitute, respectively, that authority which Christ gives to His Church and that intimacy which Christ desires with His Church. Protestantism all too often focuses on one or the other. In today's age of personal focus and subjective spirituality, it is easy to err on the side of intimacy without concerning yourself with authority. If there was a universal crisis in the modern Christian Faith, it would be with the issue of authority. And while the Catholic Church can certainly not claim total adherence by its members to the idea of a higher authority, it is obvious that the Catholic Church alone can trace a legitimate time line back to the beginning, and realize that it is the Church founded by Jesus, given to Peter, and passed down through the Apostles, the Bishops, the Popes, and the Church itself that Jesus spoke of when he stated that the "Gate of Hell shall not prevail against it." Neither of the two can exist in their fullness if each one is separated from the other. They are complementary to one unity. Subtract intimacy from authority or authority from intimacy and what remains is a pale reflection of the complete fullness in Christ that we receive from both the authority of the historic Church, as well as the intimacy of the Sacraments.

For the pretense of authority from Christ in a Protestant context, ministry after ministry is created and destroyed – lacking the complement of Christ's humbling intimacy. For the pretense of intimacy with Christ in a house church context, so many souls are led astray – lacking the complement of Christ's creedal authority. How defeated I became pursuing either authority or intimacy but never experiencing them both together! How thankful I am now to finally discover them united together – the only way either can exist in its fullness! This is what finding the Real Presence upon the Rock has meant to me. How truly wonderful is the Lord's Church!

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