

The

# Coming Home Network

International

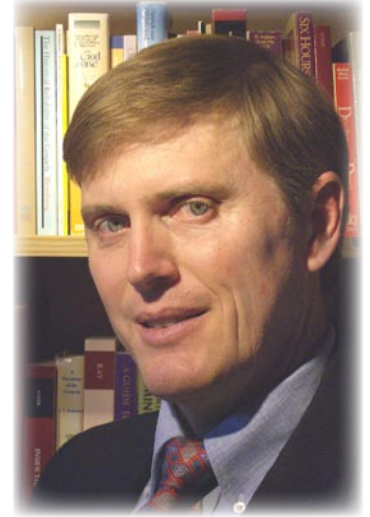
MARCH 2007 NEWSLETTER

## Journeys Home

### Christ In His Fullness

by Bruce Sullivan

I will begin with a statement that I made to a Catholic friend of mine back in 1993. In complete seriousness—and with absolute confidence—I said, “Look, Sharon, if you or anyone else can show me from the Bible that the Catholic Church is the Church that Christ established, I’ll become a Catholic tomorrow.” With that bold challenge I had hoped to goad my devoutly Catholic friend into a serious, evangelistic Bible study. Instead, she handed me a copy of Karl Keating’s *Catholicism and Fundamentalism*, and so began the end of my career as a fundamentalist preacher.



I was raised in the South as a Southern Baptist. Attending church three times each week was standard fare in our home. I am eternally grateful to the Southern Baptist Convention, and to my family, for rooting me in the Scriptures, for introducing me to Christ, and for instilling within my soul the conviction that what this world needs more than anything else is Jesus. But it was not until I went off to college that I began to examine what I believed and, more importantly, why I believed it.

Throughout my college years I interacted with members of various Protestant denominations and listened to a wide variety of campus preachers. I knew that my own theology had several loose ends, and I was searching intently for what could tie it all together. My searching eventually led me to a relatively small denomination known as the Church of Christ.

The Church of Christ is a denomination that sprang out of what some historians refer to as the American Restoration Movement or the Stone-Campbell Movement (so named for its two most prominent historical figures, Barton W. Stone and Alexander Campbell). Launched in the

early nineteenth century, the movement was originally conceived by its proponents as a means of transcending denominational divisions and uniting all believers in Christ on universally accepted essentials of the faith. Because of the difficulty in establishing the precise content of “universally accepted essentials,” the movement soon became a very divisive one and eventually split into three separate denominations: the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), the independent Christian Churches, and the Church of Christ. The modern day Disciples of Christ emphasize the movement’s early theme of Christian unity, whereas the independent Christian Churches and Churches of Christ tend to emphasize the theme of “restoration.” Together, these three denominations can claim approximately four million members.

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The Churches of Christ attracted me by what they would call “non-denominational Christianity.” They had several neat-sounding “creedal” statements that I found nothing short of enthralling. These included such declarations as: “We are Christians only, but not the only Christians”; “We speak where the Bible speaks, and we’re silent where the Bible is silent”; and “We call Bible things by Bible names.” These concepts were mighty attractive for me in view of the denominational chaos surrounding me. So in 1985, I was baptized at the Auburn Church of Christ in Auburn, Alabama, and began a ten-year association with the denomination.

The Churches of Christ had an enormous impact on my life. For one thing, they introduced me to my wife Gloria, who was a fifth generation follower of the Stone-Campbell movement and an active member of the Auburn Church of Christ. They also introduced me to ideas that were very much at odds with my Baptist upbringing—ideas that would dramatically impact my spiritual journey.

First of all, the Stone-Campbell Churches of Christ introduced me to the Biblical basis for believing that Christ established a visible, identifiable, and institutional Church. While that is a very Catholic idea, it is not one that is usually associated with evangelical Protestantism. Secondly, they showed me—from the Bible—that Baptism is for the remission of sins. Likewise, this may be a distinctly Catholic idea, but it is not a very Baptist idea. Finally, they also presented me with the Scriptural evidence for believing that justification is not by faith alone and that one can, indeed, fall from grace (as opposed to the Calvinist teaching of “once saved, always saved). Again, these were definitely not in line with Baptist teaching, but as I was to learn later, these were solidly in line with Catholic teaching. Without realizing it at the time, the Churches of Christ were to become something of a stepping-stone from my evangelical Protestant upbringing to the Catholic faith.

After graduation from Auburn in 1986, Gloria and I were married and departed for studies at the Sunset School of Preaching in Lubbock, Texas. We chose Sunset because of its reputation for academic intensity and missionary zeal. For two years we were the privileged pupils of men who

had given their lives in missionary service all around the globe. Their examples served to heighten our own desire for missionary service. We became charter members of a missionary team that was bound for Brazil—the largest Catholic nation in the world. We selected Brazil because, at the time, we believed that more than anyone else, Catholics stood in need of the true Gospel of Jesus Christ.

It goes without saying, but my view of Catholicism at the time was somewhat less than complimentary. I did not believe that Catholics should be considered Christians in the proper sense of the word. In my mind, they were idolatrous, Mary-worshiping, children of the Whore of Babylon who had embraced a soul-damning false gospel

that came straight from the pits of hell! I must hasten to add, however, that it was not mean spiritedness that animated me in my posture towards Catholics and Catholicism. Rather, I was compelled by sincere conviction and, sadly, gross ignorance.

The plan was for each of the mission team families to work with a sponsoring congregation for a period of two years prior to embarking on a five-year service commitment in Brazil. So upon graduation, Gloria and I moved to Kingsport, Tennessee, to work with a congregation that had agreed to be our sponsor. Those two years were intended to provide team members the opportunity to gain practical ministry experience, study Portuguese (the language of Brazil),

and develop a working relationship with their sponsoring congregation. It was a solid plan formulated by a group of veteran missionaries. Within less than a year, however, our mission team disbanded.

The disruption in our missionary plans left us in a tough spot financially. With Gloria and I both determined to keep her at home with our daughter Mary, I decided to seek employment outside of the ministry. Since my degree from Auburn was in agriculture, I applied for—and received—a position with the University of Kentucky College of Agriculture’s Cooperative Extension Service. I was given the appointment as County Extension Agent for 4-H & Youth Development in Hart County, Kentucky (only thirty miles from Gloria’s home in Metcalfe County). We continued to actively serve in our local congregation of the Church of Christ. I continued to preach and teach

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# I Write in Mourning

I write in mourning: My football team lost. Badly. Ouch!

They had gone undefeated and were ranked number one all year—until one dreadful evening in early January. Our quarterback had received the Heisman trophy, and he and several others on the squad had become household names across America. Nearly every poll and every commentator had projected our team to be the clear winner of the National Championship, and, after our star receiver took the opening kickoff 93-yards for a touchdown, my family and I did back-flips, lost in our joyous presumption that surely we were on the road to a blowout! The game did prove to be a blowout, but with us in the loss column.

Granted, it would be better to let it go and move on, but I need to state something that I've heard few commentators admit. Television, radio, and newsprint pundits have posed dozens of reasons and excuses for this unexpected debacle, all of which have merit. Yes, our Heisman trophy quarterback and other award-winning players did not live up to their expectations, and the other team's offense and defense performed much better than expected. But I think the pundits missed the most obvious reason for the outcome: The game was simply won and lost in the trenches. Basically, their offensive and defensive lines defeated our offensive and defensive lines. If our offensive line had kept their defensive line out, our Heisman winning quarterback would have had the time to run his game and be his old self. Instead, from the opening play, our quarterback was scrambling for his life. And if our defensive line had broken through their offensive line, we would have prevented their quarterback from carrying out their coach's superior game plan. Instead, from their opening drive, they cut through us like the proverbial hot knife through butter.

But for all my sorrow, I still love football. I love it partially because, like no other sport, I think it offers so many insightful analogies to life, and specifically to our life together in the Church. That night's loss clearly illustrates that every single player on a team is important, not just those who are most visible. Our quarterback would never have been nominated for the Heisman if the nationally lauded receivers had

dropped his passes, if the nationally known running backs had fumbled his handoffs, or especially if the lesser known, even unknown, center, tackles, guards, etc., had failed their assignments in each offensive or defensive play.

The better every player on a squad fulfills his assignments, the more successful a team becomes. Some players become famous, some remain unknown, but every player is important. So goes the Church.

The Catechism states in its prologue:

*Those who with God's help have welcomed Christ's call and freely responded to it are urged on by love of Christ to proclaim the Good News everywhere in the world. This treasure, received from the apostles, has been faithfully guarded by their successors. All Christ's faithful are called to hand it on from generation to generation, by professing the faith, by living it in fraternal sharing, and by celebrating it in liturgy and prayer.*

I can see at least two lessons in this. One, it sadly has become a lifestyle for many to complain about the present state of things in the Church, pointing fingers at the more visible candidates—the quarterbacks—charging that they are not doing their jobs! “They are failing to fulfill their callings; they are letting us down.” But as this quote from the Catechism reiterates, though the treasure of the apostolic Deposit of Faith “has been faithfully guarded by their successors, ALL CHRIST'S FAITHFUL are called to hand it on.” And like a Heisman quarterback, our bishops and priests cannot do their jobs well unless we “lesser knowns” do ours.

There's another lesson from this, however, that more directly applies to our work in the *CHNetwork*. Over the past 13 plus years, we have worked with close to 1300 ministers who have contacted us for help or encouragement in their journeys toward the Catholic Church. Many, if not most, of these formerly ordained clergyman presume that God is calling them to continue at the same level of ministry once they become Catholics: from quarterbacks to quarterbacks— from ministers to priests. For many, this of course is true,

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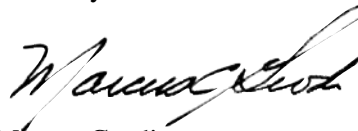


and we do all we can to help them in this discerning process. For most of us, however, God has called us home to use our gifts, training, and experience as active lay men and women in the New Evangelization.

This, in fact, is precisely what our data has shown. The following statistics, compiled by Jim Anderson, indicate that of 440 clergy converts, for whom we have full data, nearly two-thirds have remained Catholic laymen after conversion, and 95% of these have continued in some form of full-time or volunteer ministry.

Please pray for all those on the journey, lay or clergy, that they may clearly discern how and where God is calling them to use their gifts, training, and experience, and that they may humbly accept this calling, whatever it is — quarterback, receiver, lineman, even water boy!

Sincerely in Christ,



Marcus Grodi

	Occupation	Number	Percent	Totals by Class	Total Percents
<b>I</b>	<b>Priest</b>	114	25.70%	150	33.90%
	<b>Deacon</b>	7	1.60%		
	<b>Religious</b>	7	1.60%		
	<b>Student</b>	22	5.00%		
<b>II</b>	<b>Academic</b>	60	13.50%	157	35.40%
	<b>Full-time Lay Apostolate</b>	97	22.00%		
<b>III</b>	<b>Secular Employed</b>	129	29.10%	136	30.70%
	<b>Unemployed</b>	7	1.60%		
	<b>Total</b>	443	100.00%	443	100.00%

*continued from conversion story by B. Sullivan on page 2*

on a regular basis. And true to the vision instilled in us at Sunset, we continued to look for the opportunity to join a mission team bound for South America.

It was after moving back to Gloria’s home in Kentucky that our conversion to Catholicism began in earnest. It began when a large Catholic family — the family of Art and Sharon Antonio — moved into our area.

Art had just retired from the Navy. He and Sharon were drawn to Kentucky by affordable land and the prospect of raising their children in a wholesome, rural setting. We became acquainted through my work in the county Extension office. Upon learning of their devotion to the Catholic faith, I set out to do the most charitable thing I could think of: Introduce them to the “true” Gospel of Christ as presented by the “true” Church of Christ.

For many months, I tried to “evangelize” the Antonios. In turn, they gave me a three-pronged introduction to the Catholic Faith. This three-pronged introduction took the form of the *Couple to Couple League*, Karl Keating, and Fr. Benjamin Luther.

First, let me mention the *Couple to Couple League*. Gloria and I had always been very pro-life on the issue of abortion but were unaware of the connection between contraception and abortion. Through the *Couple to Couple League*, we learned the scriptural, historical, and rational support for the Catholic Church’s moral teachings regarding artificial means of contraception. In response to this, we immediately changed our practices in this area of life. And, believe it or not, what I had thought would drive a wedge between husband and wife — namely the Church’s teaching on marital chastity — proved instead to be a most sublime blessing. Ironically, this teaching that is so often dismissed out of hand by those born into the Catholic faith, has been shown, time and again, to actually draw people into the Church.

But while the impact of this introduction to the beauty of the Church’s moral teaching was profound and life changing, we were far from convinced that the Catholic

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Church was the true Church of Christ. As we say in Kentucky, “There was still a long row to hoe.”

The second part of our introduction to the Catholic Faith came in the form of a book by Karl Keating, the President of Catholic Answers. After months of getting nowhere in my attempts to get Mrs. Antonio to study the Bible with me, I decided to engage in a little bit of charitable baiting. After one particularly frustrating exchange, I looked at her and said, “Look, if you or anyone else can show me from the Bible that the Catholic Church is the Church that Christ established, I’ll become a Catholic tomorrow.” The next day, she handed me a copy of Karl Keating’s *Catholicism and Fundamentalism*. I could not have been more thrilled. As I saw it, in giving me that book to read, she was also giving me license to critique it and expose to her the manifest errors that I knew it had to contain. In other words, I took it as a sign that we were finally getting somewhere.

I went home and looked at the book. On the back cover, I read a statement by Sheldon Vanauken: “I strongly advise honest fundamentalists not to read this book. They might find their whole position collapsing in ruins.” I laughed. I think I may have even laughed out loud. But I didn’t laugh for long.

Keating’s book did at least three things for me. First, he provided numerous examples of the ways in which anti-Catholics distort the Catholic faith and obscure the truth about Catholicism. Second, he exposed the flimsy nature of the assumptions underlying my own Protestant faith (particularly those assumptions pertaining to the Bible and authority). And last, but surely not least, he did something that I thought no one could do: He provided a compelling Biblical presentation of the Catholic doctrines that are most often opposed by fundamentalist Christians. By the time I had finished reading the book, I knew that I was in trouble. I realized that I had far more questions than answers.

The questions that troubled me the most were those pertaining to authority. I was particularly perplexed by the issue of canon. How could I claim that the Bible *alone* was all that I needed when the Bible itself does not identify

its own canon? After all, there were literally dozens of writings that had circulated throughout the early Church that claimed to be inspired. On what basis did I accept the canon of New Testament Scripture upon which my faith depended? How could I know with infallible certitude that the twenty-seven letters in my New Testament comprised the true canon? Maybe there were supposed to be twenty-nine books in the New Testament and the two that were missing contained keys to understanding the other twenty-seven. Maybe there were supposed to be only twenty-five books in the New Testament, in which case our present canon has two too many. What if those two extra books contain false doctrine? After all, Martin Luther struggled with this notion and actually suggested that the epistle of St. James be removed from the Bible!



Were I to gloss over the problem of determining canon, I was still left in the unenviable position of claiming that all I needed was the Bible when, in fact, the Bible itself teaches no such thing. In fact, it indicates the contrary. For example: St. Paul expressly underscored our need for oral Tradition (cf. 2 Thess. 2:15) and the Church (cf. 1 Tim. 3:15). Moreover, virtually every New Testament epistle was written with the assumption that the writer and his intended recipients shared a body of common knowledge—the Deposit of Faith (cf. Jude 3). In other words, the recipients understood what was written in light of the teaching they had

already received. Oral tradition was therefore the context through which what was written was understood and put into practice. Or, to put it yet another way: God inspired members of the Church to write to other members of the Church about matters of concern to the Church—thereby underscoring the teaching that the Church, Sacred Tradition, and the Bible are truly inseparable. Yet as a Protestant, I downplayed—if not denied—the role of both Sacred Tradition and the Church.

The more I struggled with the issue of authority, the more I became convinced that it is the ultimate Protestant “pickle.” As a Protestant, I had claimed that the Bible *alone* was all that I needed. Yet the Bible itself indicated otherwise. Without an infallible certitude of canon, the

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best I could do was stand in the pulpit and proclaim, “Thus sayeth the Lord...I think.” I could offer only my own, admittedly fallible, opinions about the interpretation of writings that I thought to be inspired.

While these realities served to expose the inadequacies of my Protestant faith, they did not necessarily mean that I was ready to accept the Catholic faith. There remained a seemingly endless list of standard objections to Catholicism that needed to be addressed. To help us address those issues, Art and Sharon encouraged us to contact Fr. Benjamin Luther, a priest from the Diocese of Owensboro, Kentucky, who also happened to be a convert from the Stone-Campbell Churches of Christ.

Fr. Luther drove nearly four hours to meet with me at a roadside diner near my home. That first meeting lasted six hours. When we parted company, Fr. Luther assured me that he would keep in touch—and he proved to be a man of his word. From that point forward, it seemed as if our mailbox was hardly ever empty. I am quite convinced that he impoverished himself sending me a veritable library through the mail and taking my collect phone calls nearly every Saturday morning. He proved immeasurably helpful as we worked through the issues in our efforts to separate fact from fiction regarding the Catholic faith.

Early in the course of our studies, we came to the realization that most of what we had been told about Catholicism had been grossly distorted. That realization itself was a tremendous grace. It helped us to see that before we could decide whether or not the Catholic Church teaches the truth, we had to know the truth about the Catholic Church and her teaching. With that realization to guide us—coupled with the knowledge that our former approach to authority was hopelessly flawed—we delved into a thorough, and at times anxious, study of Catholicism.

I characterize our studies as “anxious” because, coming from a Church of Christ background, we had some rather serious convictions regarding truth, judgment, heaven, and hell. We feared not only for our own souls but also for those of our children if, inadvertently, we led them astray. We wanted desperately to do the will of the Lord by embracing the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. At times it seemed as if we could argue both

sides of the issues. At times we wondered if there would ever be any clear-cut answers. We knew we could never go back to our former denomination, but that did not mean that we were at ease with Catholicism. A lifetime of prior teaching, coupled with the ghosts of false caricatures of Catholicism, seemed to have a death grip on us intellectually and emotionally. But our Lord is the One who has conquered death. Thankfully, through time, prayer, and study, He freed us from the deadly grip of error and gave to us the grace to embrace our Holy Mother, the Catholic Church.

A watershed event in this process came in December of 1993 when Fr. Luther and I attended the very first *CHNetwork* retreat on the campus of Franciscan University of Steubenville. On the second day of the retreat, I awakened early in the home of my host family, and went downstairs

while everyone else was either asleep or occupied with the start of a new day. I could not help but notice a small “prayer closet” off to the side of the living room. It was a rather small niche with a kneeler, various holy images, and candles. In the dark solitude of that moment, I was drawn to prayer. This time, however, my prayer would be different than any prayer I had offered before.

For months I had found myself arguing both sides of the issues almost to the point of despair. In the quiet of this moment, I knew that I had come to the end of my rope and needed help. I remember thinking to myself, “If what the Catholic Church teaches about the Communion of Saints is true, then maybe this is the time to enlist the prayers of the saints in heaven.” Kneeling in that little niche, I approached the Father’s throne of grace asking for the grace of clarity and understanding. This, of course, was nothing new. I had done so more times than I could count over the preceding six months of struggle. What was new was this: I concluded by asking the saints in heaven to pray for me. Specifically, I solicited the prayers of Peter, Paul, and Mary (not to be confused with the popular 1960’s singing group). Interestingly enough, I was also quick to ask God to forgive me if such an action was offensive to Him. I did this because, while my studies had sufficiently demonstrated the veracity of the Catholic teaching on the Communion of Saints, the outward, concrete expression of the teaching ran against the emotional grain of my Protestant upbringing. What was about to follow during

As a Protestant, I had claimed that the Bible *alone* was all that I needed. Yet the Bible itself indicated otherwise. Without an infallible certitude of canon, the best I could do was stand in the pulpit and proclaim, “Thus sayeth the Lord...I think.”

the next hour, however, would assure me that Sts. Peter, Paul, and Mary had indeed heard my plea and that, in response to their prayers, God was pouring out His grace.

Back on the Campus of the Franciscan University, our retreat resumed with all of us participating in the early morning Mass in the campus chapel. I had been to Mass a couple of times before, but could never get past the knee-jerk reactions that I seemed to have at nearly everything that was said or done. This time something was different. I was seated in the back of the chapel simply observing the proceedings. But instead of nitpicking and criticizing, I found myself contemplating questions that were slowly taking shape in my mind. “What if that man (the priest) is who they say he is?” “What if he is really doing what they say he is doing?” “What if what they say is happening is actually happening?” As I considered these questions in the light of what I had learned from the Scriptures and early Christian writings pertaining to the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist, I was left quite literally speechless (which, for those who know me well, comes awfully close to a confirming miracle in my conversion to Catholicism).

Please keep in mind that, as a former Church of Christ preacher, this was all a bit difficult to swallow. Church of Christ members are generally very leery of subjective experiences. As a rule, they demand cold, hard, objective facts with the accompanying “chapter and verse” from Scriptures. Yet the Scriptures themselves testify to the marvelous ways in which God works in our hearts—ways that many might call “subjective.” Would I become a Catholic based merely upon a fuzzy, subjective, emotional experience? Hardly. That is not what occurred that morning. What did occur was this: God took all of the “cold, hard, objective facts” that I had learned concerning the Eucharist, tied them together, and removed the self-imposed barriers to understanding. In a word, He gave grace. And with that grace, I knew that I would one day be Catholic.

I was received into the Church during the Easter Vigil of 1995. Shortly thereafter I went away on a business trip. In the course of a casual conversation, a co-worker asked me, “What did you find in the Catholic Church that you did not find in Protestantism?” It was a sincere question and a good one as well. I mulled it over for quite some time and finally settled on a short answer (something quite unusual for me). In Catholicism I had found Christ in His fullness.

As Protestant Christians, Gloria and I did know and love Christ. We did not, however, experience Him in His fullness. Without realizing it, we had inadvertently



rejected many of the gifts He wanted to give us—gifts that could be received only through full incorporation into His mystical Body, the Catholic Church. Looking back, we are both truly amazed at what God has so graciously given to us in the Catholic Church: He has given Christ in all of His fullness—the fullness of His Word, the fullness of His sacraments, the fullness of worship, the fullness of His family, the fullness of vocation, and the fullness of salvation.

*“Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, for ever and ever. Amen.”*  
Ephesians 3:20:21

*Since being received into the Catholic Church in 1995, Bruce has served as a catechist in his local parish, a lecturer and speaker on topics related to Catholic apologetics, and a dedicated foot soldier in the New Evangelization called for by Pope John Paul II. He has been a guest on EWTN’s Mother Angelica Live, The Journey Home, and Deep In Scripture. He presently resides with his wife, Gloria, and their five children on a family farm in Kentucky.*

*This account is a condensed version of Bruce Sullivan’s story as found in C*



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