



March 2011 Newsletter

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THE COMING HOME NETWORK INTERNATIONAL



Glimpses of Divine Humor

By Andrew M. Seddon, M.D.

On the rare occasions when I attempt the impossible task of imagining what heaven might be like, I envision saints — but not the dour, stern, serious saints of so much artwork. I imagine smiling saints with a humorous twinkle in their eyes. Saints such as Aidan, Cuthbert, Columba, and Patrick; an eighth-century pilgrim to the Holy Land from Byzantium (more of him later); and closer in time and experience, Blessed John Henry Cardinal Newman.

Why smiling saints? Because, looking back along my path to the Catholic Church, I can see the instances of humor that God used along the way, glinting like flecks of gold sprinkled in a vein of quartz.

Unlike the Celtic saints and the pilgrim who were Catholics in the undivided Church, I, like Cardinal Newman, was an unexpected convert from Anglicanism. Saints, circumstances, history, and my heritage — no doubt at God's instigation — united to bring me not only across the Atlantic, but the greater distance across the Tiber.

Early Years

I was born in England, the son of a Baptist minister. My parents emigrated to the U.S. when I was young, and my father pastored churches in upstate New York, New Brunswick, Maryland, and West Virginia. My sister and I grew up on his excellent, Bible-based preaching, and I will forever be grateful to my parents for the loving Christian home they provided.

My parents recall that my first profession of faith came at age 7, and baptism at 10, but I cannot remember a time when I was not a believer. Being a Christian has always been a natural part of me.

We moved often, and though the flavor of the churches varied, all were Baptist. We had little contact with other denominations. The Catholic Church was rarely mentioned.

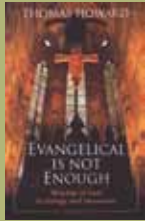
If I ever thought of Catholics, it was as fellow Christians who had somehow gotten a little off-track, perhaps never having fully escaped the Middle Ages. Catholics weren't bad or evil, just poor souls who had to work unduly hard to earn their salvation and who ... *continued on page 2*

Journeys Home

FEATURED RESOURCES

Evangelical Is Not Enough: Worship of God in Liturgy and Sacrament

By Dr. Thomas Howard



In this deeply moving narrative, Thomas Howard describes his pilgrimage from Evangelical faith (which he loves and reveres as the religion of his youth) to liturgical Christian faith. He

soon afterward became a Catholic. Dr. Howard describes the Evangelical tradition with great sympathy and then examines more formal, liturgical worship with the freshness of someone discovering for the first time what his soul had always hungered for. Non-Catholics will find here an appreciation of the formal and liturgical aspects of the Catholic faith. Catholics will see with fresh eyes the beauty of their tradition. (*Ignatius*, 1988)

Lead Kindly Light: My Journey to Rome

By Dr. Thomas Howard



Through his prolific and highly regarded writing, Thomas Howard is familiar to Protestants and Catholics alike. But many have never heard the story of how he became Catholic. With

grace, charm, and wit, Dr. Howard describes his journey from the Evangelical tradition to the Anglican tradition, and finally to the Church of Rome. In a world saturated with fashionable unbelief, Howard's testimony inspires and informs. (*Ignatius*, 2004)



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...Journeys Home Continued...

were overly attached to Mary. (She was never referred to in our home as the "Blessed Virgin.")

It was curious, then — and perhaps the first incident of divine humor — when, after I completed my freshman year at the University of New Brunswick, my parents moved to Maryland and I transferred to Mount St. Mary's College (now University) in Emmittsburg — a Catholic college! I didn't choose "The Mount" for religious reasons, however, but because of its academic reputation and its modest size.

Although I was a pre-med student, my course of study included several required theology classes. My term papers, unsurprisingly, evidenced my Protestant viewpoint. One was returned covered in comments: "See me," "Ask me about this," "Talk to me."

Even so, the tolerant priest gave me an "A." I think God was chuckling then, but I wasn't about to consider seriously the Catholic Church, and I didn't follow up on the priest's red ink invitation to discuss the issues.

After graduating from the University of Maryland School of Medicine, I pursued residency training in West Virginia. I attended church when my hectic schedule allowed, but my spiritual life languished. For two years I dated a Catholic nurse, but spiritual matters didn't really enter into our relationship, which ended when I relocated to upstate New York to enter private practice.

The practice didn't pan out, and I moved west to Montana to work in an urgent care center. My parents followed soon after. My father retired from the pastorate and became organist at a local Episcopal Church.

I wasn't attached to a church, and so, with trepidation — fearing terminal boredom — I accepted his suggestion to experience liturgical worship. To my surprise I found that it touched something deep inside and connected me to generations of Christians past, particularly English ones.

Because of our frequent moves and unsettled existence, finding spiritual roots and my heritage became important. I loved traveling to England, worshiping in ancient cathedrals and parish churches where people had praised God for centuries.

About this time I embarked on my second vocation as a writer. I addressed medical topics but also wrote Christian articles, short stories, and novels. A shift from science fiction to historical fiction produced an interest in the Celtic and Roman eras, and I obtained a master's degree in Celtic Christianity from the University of Wales. I think it was another instance of divine humor that my second novel, *Imperial Legions*, was written by an Episcopalian and published by a Southern Baptist press whose senior editor was a Messianic Jew who attended a Lutheran church!

More importantly, a beautiful veterinarian in Florida read one of my articles in a Christian magazine, and she wrote to me. Correspondence led to long-distance dating and finally marriage. Olivia's spiritual journey had

been quite different from mine: She'd grown up Lutheran (God's "frozen chosen," as she put it) before becoming Baptist.

Years of Discontent

After our marriage, we continued to attend the Episcopal Church, although Olivia found that the liturgy, rather than connecting her to God, seemed to separate her. Yet paradoxically — perhaps because of her European (Swiss) roots, she too felt a deep connection to the past in Britain's old churches.

Still, we remained Episcopalians for several years. And then the Episcopal denomination began to disintegrate. Decades of theological decline, modernism, and liberalism took their toll, resulting in the acceptance on the denominational level of a practically unitarian "gospel" of humanism, self-indulgence, and immorality. The gospel of Christ that emphasized sin, the need for repentance, redemption, and transformation of life by Christ, was increasingly replaced by a message of "inclusiveness" and "tolerance," which (since God didn't really care about trivialities such as sin, morality, and sound doctrine) meant accepting people as they were and *leaving them there*.

The predictable result was the propagation on the denominational level of heterodox teachings and behavior, made most evident in the ordination as bishop of a man who had left his wife and children for a male lover. Dismayed by these trends, many faithful clergy, parishes, and members began leaving for more conservative Anglican bodies, Eastern Orthodoxy, or Rome.

To me, the process exposed disturbing flaws in Anglicanism. Doctrinal pronouncements now rested with the laity; the Bible was reinterpreted to suit current social trends; the traditions of the church were dismissed as relics of past cultures; erring bishops and clergy could go their own way without fear of discipline. There was no pope or Magisterium to say

no. There seemed to be no pillar of definitive faith and morals.

The final nail in the coffin was learning that the Episcopal denomination belonged to the pro-abortion Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice. I recalled a powerful comment that I had

read: "Real churches don't kill babies." How could any church calling itself Christian support the murder of the unborn?

Since our parish was unwilling to take a stand, and my personal letter-writing campaign to the bishop of Montana proved fruitless, we decided to leave. We tried several churches of various denominations, but none seemed quite right. One Sunday we visited a Catholic church. ... *continued on page 4*



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on television and radio, hosted by
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Encore: Saturdays 7:00 AM ET

March 7

Tom Peterson*

Former Secularist

March 14

Matt Swaim*

Former Methodist

March 21

Matthew Fradd*

Former atheist, agnostic

The Journey Home in Canada

March 28

Wes & Kelly Baker*

Former Nazarenes

**This schedule is subject to change.*



This year *The Journey Home* again goes international to bring you stories of men and women who have come home to the Catholic Church. Be sure to tune in the third Monday of each month to view all-new episodes of *The Journey Home* taped in Canada.

...Journeys Home Continued...

Discovering the Catholic Church

We weren't expecting much — Mary worship, perhaps — and sat near the back in case we needed to make a quick getaway. We didn't need to do so, however, for to our surprise, the Mass seemed to be quite Christ-centered.

We began to attend regularly, both at home and while traveling. Olivia particularly loved Notre Dame de Paris in France and the deep spirituality we sensed there. We found the same Christ-centeredness. We spoke with several priests, who were devout, godly men.

I read many conversion stories and gained insights from people who had made vastly different journeys to Rome. *The Surprised by Truth* series proved to be an excellent compilation of such accounts. From the nineteenth century I read Cardinals John Henry Newman and Henry Edward Manning. From the early twentieth century, John Stoddard, Ronald Knox, Vernon Johnson, Frederick Kinsman, and Selden Delany. Contemporary converts included Alex Jones, Dr. Scott Hahn, Stephen Ray, Dr. Thomas Howard, and David Currie.

For a more personal opinion, I talked to a retired Episcopal bishop, a recent convert to the Catholic Church, to obtain the opinion of someone more theologically educated than I. Was the Catholic Church truly the Church that Christ founded? His studies had convinced him so. Knox, Newman, Manning, and also Monsignor Robert Hugh Benson were theologically astute Anglicans who had reached the same conclusion.

Could God possibly be leading us to the Catholic Church? Although we felt a pull, the Tiber is a wide river to cross, and there was no family support — quite the opposite, resulting in some intense conversations and disagreement. It meant breaking away from my familial worship ties and setting out like St. Brendan crossing the ocean in his little boat, dependent on the wind of the Holy Spirit in search of a more personal faith. Being of a somewhat intellectual nature, I couldn't go on feelings. I needed facts.

And so I began to study further. Although Christian books were part of my normal reading habits, I had read only from a Protestant perspective. I had never sought the Catholic side of the story.

There were many aspects to evaluate.

Re-Thinking Church History

There was, for example, the history of the Reformation, of which I was largely ignorant. I'd acquired a naïve, simplistic impression of "good" (enlightened, holy) Protestant Reformers squaring off against "bad" (superstitious, repressive) Catholic authorities.

On examination, though, the Reformers didn't seem so good. They weren't of the quality, say, of Francis of Assisi, who saw the need for Church reform in his own day and went about it with humility. The Reformers



didn't seem particularly holy and couldn't agree with each other on various theological issues. When the chance came to work with a pope who truly wanted reform — Adrian VI — they wouldn't have anything to do with him.

In particular, the Reformation in my homeland, England, seemed to be based less on religious principles than on Henry VIII's desire for a male successor and the craving for wealth that he shared with his nobles. When he closed the monasteries, Henry didn't distinguish between those that were faithful and those that were decadent. The bottom line was money and submission to the Crown.

Yes, the Catholic Church needed reform in morals and discipline, but the Reformers went further, changing doctrines and dogmas.

I had never seen the divisions between the many Protestant denominations as being particularly relevant, but my perspective began to change. If the Holy Spirit were truly guiding the Reformation, then why didn't He tell the Reformers the same things? Why did Luther teach one doctrine, Calvin another, Zwingli a third, and on and on?

On a logical level, it didn't make sense. Every denomination claims to possess authority and truth, yet so many conflicting and varying opinions can't all be true. For example, Baptism is a sacrament for Anglicans, an ordinance for Baptists, and dispensable for the Salvation Army. An Anglican may believe in a symbolic Eucharist, a spiritual Eucharist, or a Real Presence. Surely these are not matters for opinion. Surely it matters whether the Eucharist is the Body and Blood of Christ — for it cannot both be and not be.

The doctrines of *sola scripture* (scripture alone) and *sola fide* (faith alone) upon further examination also seemed to rest on shaky foundations. The doctrine of Scripture alone is not found in Scripture; rather, Christ himself said He would build a Church that would be the pillar and bulwark of faith.

As for faith alone: Well, Christ also made it explicit that judgment will be based on what we have done in His name (see Mt 25:31–46). We are told that good works “benefit everyone” (Titus 3:8), which must include those who perform them. Even one of my heroes — missionary physician Wilfred Grenfell, who was not a Catholic — once wrote, “By and by it will not be ‘What did you *know*?’ that we shall be asked [by God], but ‘What did you *do*?’”

Regarding Catholic faith and doctrine, it didn't take long for me to discover that many of my impressions were wrong. I read books explaining the Catholic faith, finding Dr. Alan Schreck and James Cardinal Gibbons particularly helpful. I also read anti-Catholic books to see how their arguments squared up against those of the Catholic authors.

... continued on page 6



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THE SPOUSES NETWORK

Are you the spouse of a clergy person interested in becoming Catholic?

The *Spouses Network* aids and provides fellowship for the spouses of clergy on the journey to the Catholic Church as well as those who are new Catholics. Through the *Spouses Network*, spouses of clergy who have embraced the Catholic faith provide one-on-one assistance to clergy spouses who are still on the journey or have recently become Catholic. In this way they offer a source of friendship, support, and increased love of Jesus Christ and His Church.

If you feel called to be part of the *Spouses Network*, whether as the spouse of a clergy person who has made the journey home and would like to assist someone, or as a spouse of a minister who is either on the journey or a new Catholic, we invite you to contact CHNI to assist us in the development of this network.

For more information, please contact Mary Clare Piecynski by e-mail at maryp@chnetwork.org or by phone at 740-450-1175 ext. 105.

We ask all members of *The Coming Home Network International* please to keep the *Spouses Network* in your prayers as we seek to answer the needs of those spouses of clergy on the journey home and those who are new converts.

NEWSLETTER COPIES

CHNI encourages members to make copies of the newsletter to distribute to family, friends, and church groups. We do ask that copies of the newsletter not be sold. CHNI and the authors reserve all rights and permissions.

...Journeys Home Continued...

Once I began to understand what the Catholic Church really taught (as opposed to what I had thought it taught) on issues such as the papacy, the Eucharist, and the relationship of faith and works in regard to justification, it seemed to harmonize better with Scripture and make more coherent sense. The sacramental nature of Catholic belief seemed a much richer, deeper, fuller understanding of reality than those traditions that lacked (or had dispensed with) sacramental concepts.

Then, I wondered, what did the early Christians believe, those who were the successors of the Apostles? Were they more Protestant in their beliefs and outlook, or more Catholic? So I began to read the Church Fathers.

I found, as Cardinal Newman had discovered long before, that “to be deep in history is to cease to be Protestant.” I began to feel a closer connection to the Body of Christ as it has existed across almost two thousand years.

In the autumn of 2006, Olivia and I vacationed in England, where I acquired Frederick Cowles’ 1933 book *Dust of Years: Pilgrimages in Search of the Ancient Shrines of England*. (God surely placed it in a used bookshop for my attention!) Cowles, a Catholic, lamented the mutilation of many holy sites during the Reformation and by Oliver Cromwell’s Puritans. Through this book I came to see these familiar places through different eyes.

Of course, the ancient parish churches and great cathedrals I loved — Salisbury, Wells, Hereford — had been Catholic before being taken over by the Anglicans, but this knowledge had registered in my mind only on a superficial level. It somehow had never really struck me that they had been built by Catholics for Catholics. England was Anglican — now. But the indisputable fact was that England had been Catholic long before she became Anglican.

In addition, my favorite Celtic saints — Cuthbert, Aidan, Patrick, Columba — about whom I had co-authored a devotional, *Walking With the Celtic Saints*, had been Catholic, too! Despite wishful Anglican thinking today, there had never been an autonomous Celtic Church in direct continuity with the Anglican Church formed at the Reformation. The Church in England — the ancient Church, the British, Celtic Church — had always been part of the one Catholic Church. (A book I read by the non-Catholic historian J.C. McNaught, *The Celtic Church and the See of Peter*, made this quite clear.)

Once again, I could almost hear God chuckling. Cardinal Newman, too.

Among the conversion stories I had read was that of American Protestant Evangelical Fr. Dwight Longenecker, whose experience mirrored mine. Leaving his Evangelical upbringing, he eventually realized his dream of pastoring an Anglican church in England. Nevertheless, he felt a call to the Catholic Church, a move that would have spelled the end of his dream.

Troubled by doubts about what he should do, Longenecker expressed his frustration to God while attending Mass at a nearby Benedictine monastery. "All I wanted to do," he prayed, "was to serve You in the ancient church in England."

Then God replied: "But *this* is the ancient church in England."

That was what I wanted, too: the ancient church of Britain.

Hesitation and Resolution

Even so, I hesitated, reluctant to be the first member of my family to become Catholic. As if to reassure me, I read that one of Cardinal Manning's secretaries was a certain Fr. Thomas Seddon. Whether or not he was a distant relation, I have no idea. But there aren't many Seddons around, so even encountering the name was unusual.

In an antique store in Bath I purchased, and began to wear, an eighth-century bronze cross. A pilgrim to the Holy Land from Byzantium had probably once bought it as a memento. Back home, I mentioned it to Catholic author Colleen Drippé, a long-time pen-pal.

"Why don't you ask the pilgrim to pray for you?" she suggested. (Little did I know that she had been praying for years for me to become Catholic.) So I did — and I expect Colleen was amused at the thought that I unwittingly contributed to my conversion by invoking the pilgrim's intercession.

Back home, God's humor continued to crop up in unexpected ways. While in Bozeman, Montana, for a dog show in which our black German Shepherd, Finzi, was competing, I bought a Royal Doulton plate depicting Salisbury Cathedral. Then I found one dating from about 1860 with an unusual cross-like pattern that I learned was called "Rome." Salisbury to Rome. Did God use English china as a sacramental?

I could delay no longer. Despite some lingering nerves (the attitudes and feelings of a lifetime die hard) I met with the parish priest in Billings, who impressed me with his humility, kind demeanor, and ability to answer my questions. He introduced us to the RCIA director, who cheerfully shepherded us through the RCIA program. (Olivia, by God's grace, had been journeying along with me.) Their encouragement and friendship were an added blessing.

Instead of a mélange of contradictory teachings and viewpoints, we found a unified whole traceable back to the Apostles and a Church that was built, not upon the opinions of a single man — such as Luther or Calvin or any other denominational founder — but upon Christ and His first followers. We found a Church that stood for life and that had defended the Faith for two thousand years.

Of course, we encountered surprise and disbelief among friends that we would want to join a Church with so many "errors" (as if Protestant denominations were somehow error-free). We explained ... *continued on page 8*



SHARE YOUR STORY!

The Coming Home Network International always welcomes those of our members who are converts or reverts to share their stories of how they were drawn (or drawn back) to the Catholic Church. If you would like to share your story, please email Mary Clare Piecynski at maryp@chnetwork.org to request our writer's guidelines. These will tell you how to submit your testimony to consider for publication in this newsletter. We'd love to hear from you!



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Wendy Hart

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UNSOLICITED MAIL

The Coming Home Network International would like to remind our members that we are unable to send unsolicited mail. Since our ministry exclusively responds to non-Catholic clergy and laity who initiate contact with us, we cannot add anyone to our mailing list or send materials unless they themselves first make a request. However, if you would like to have *CHNI* send materials with a gift card in your name, or if you have any questions about this policy, please contact our office at 740-450-1175.

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...Journeys Home Continued...

that we were not renouncing our denominational upbringing as though it had somehow become evil or harmful. Rather, while remaining thankful for how God had used our prior traditions, were now building and expanding upon them. The process was one of growth, not replacement; of addition, not subtraction. One immediate result was a richer closeness in our marriage.

To be sure, the Catholic Church contains sinful, erring humans. But the Church is, certainly, the best place for sinners to be. What matters is that she is *Christ's Church* — and the Church of Francis of Assisi; the Celtic saints; Newman and numerous Anglican converts; teachers such as Augustine, Aquinas, and Ignatius; and untold thinkers, heroes, martyrs, and holy men and women. Among them, no doubt, were some of my English forebears.

We joined the Catholic Church at the Easter Vigil in 2008. As we made our profession of faith and received Confirmation, it was like entering the company of friends. I could almost hear Columba and Cuthbert and Aidan saying, “Welcome home,” and I thanked them for their help.

As we partook of the Eucharist as Catholics for the very first time, we felt a sense of joy and a commitment to growing closer to God and doing His will unlike any we had felt before.

In the Catholic Church we have found a home, our heritage, and our ancestors in the faith: ancestors from all nations, as the Catholic Church is truly universal. Some of that great communion of saints — including my pilgrim friend — must be chuckling at how God brought us here. And God, seeing that He appears to have an English sense of humor, must surely be smiling, too. ■



Dr. Andrew M. Seddon, a native of England, writes both fiction and non-fiction, with nearly one hundred publication credits, including three novels: *Red Planet Rising* (Crossway Books, 1995), *Imperial Legions* (Broadman & Holman, 2000), and *Iron Scepter* (Xlibris, 2001). He is also co-author of the devotional *Walking with the Celtic Saints* (Crossroad, 2004), and his short fiction and non-fiction articles have appeared in numerous magazines and journals.

Andrew holds an M.D. (University of Maryland School of Medicine, 1985); an M.A. in Celtic Christianity (University of Wales, 2003); and a B.S. in biology (Mount Saint Mary's College, 1981). He serves as a family practice physician in the SameDay Care department at Billings Clinic in Billings, Montana. He is married to Olivia, a veterinarian, and together they enjoy travel, classical music, marathon running, and hiking with their black German Shepherd, Finzi. They are members of St. Pius X Parish, Billings.

Prayer List



Clergy

- For an Episcopal seminarian in Texas, that he will come home to the Catholic Church.
- For John, a Lutheran minister in Michigan, that he will truly become an Evangelical Catholic in full communion with the See of St. Peter.
- For a Charismatic Episcopal priest in the Midwest, that he will recognize the draw to the Catholic faith that he has felt as the call of the Holy Spirit and respond in obedience to our Lord.
- For Brian, a minister of the United Church of Canada, that his reading and prayer will bring him to Jesus in the Holy Eucharist.
- For a United Methodist minister in North Carolina, that the Father will call him home to the Church that is ever ancient and ever new.
- For a bishop of the Old Catholic Church, that he will come to realize that God is calling him home to the Barque of St. Peter.
- For a Baptist minister in Minnesota, that as he discerns God's call to his heart he will respond with joy and become a Catholic Christian.
- For Gary, a nondenominational minister in North Carolina, that now that he has come to realize that the Catholic Church is the "complete Christian faith," he will become a completed Christian in full communion with the Church Jesus founded.
- For a Congregational minister in Pennsylvania, that the Lord Jesus will guide him and his family home to the Catholic Church.
- For a nondenominational lay minister in Georgia, that his prayers and meditation on the truths of the Faith will bring him grace and joy as he approaches the Sacraments at the Easter Vigil.
- For Debra in Missouri, that God will ripen her appreciation and love for the Catholic Church so that she will overcome her fear and make the leap

into full communion with the one, holy Catholic and apostolic Church.

■ For Glen, an Evangelical minister in Tennessee, that the Holy Spirit will overcome his skepticism and grant him the grace to come home to the Church founded by Jesus.

■ For a Methodist seminarian in Georgia, that his examination of the Catholic faith will bring him home to the Church.

Lay

- For Rae, as she examines the Catholic faith, that her study will bring her home to the Church.
- For Chris, as he asks questions about Catholic teaching, that he will find the fullness of truth he is seeking in the Catholic Church.
- For Frank's wife, who is seriously ill, that she will encounter the healing presence of Jesus in her life.
- For Lorry, that her struggle with Catholic teaching will fade in the light of God's truth.
- For Carol, who is struggling with being the only Catholic in her family.
- For Ray, who is looking for a way to support himself financially.
- For Kristi, who is seeking the truth, that God will reward her pursuits and lead her closer to Him.
- For a convert to the Catholic Church who is suffering from doubts about the Faith.
- For Lauren, who is drawn to the Catholic Church and is unsure how to break the news to her family.
- For Justin and his wife, who are seeking to follow God's will.
- For Dennis, whose wife does not share his desire to be Catholic, that God will give them unity and peace in their marriage.

■ For Kevin, who is drawn to the Catholic Church, that the Holy Spirit will give his wife the grace to understand her husband's desire to be Catholic.

■ For Sara, who wants to be Catholic but is hesitant to pursue her interest because her family will not support her decision.

■ For Janice, who is uncertain what to do about her wish to become Catholic, that the Holy Spirit will encourage her to follow the convictions of her conscience.

■ For Sally, who is having a difficult time understanding the authority of the Catholic Church.

■ For Kerry and her husband, that the Holy Spirit will guide their walk toward full communion with the See of St. Peter.

■ For Susan and her faith journey, that the Lord Jesus will bring her into full communion with His Church.

■ For Joy, who desires to become Catholic but doesn't want to cause her family distress, that Jesus will give her wisdom and discernment about how best to proceed.

■ For Joselyn, who very much wants to become Catholic, that all difficulties will be resolved so she can move toward receiving Jesus in the Eucharist.

■ For Kristina, that the grace she receives in the Sacraments will bring healing to her marriage.

■ For Cheryl's health, and that she will find a way to come home fully to the Catholic Church.

In every issue we include timely prayer concerns from the membership. All members are encouraged to pray at least one hour each month before the Blessed Sacrament for the needs, both general and specific, of the CHNetwork and its members and supporters.

Please submit all prayer requests and answers to CHNI Prayer List, PO Box 8290, Zanesville, OH 43702. Or email prayer requests to prayers@chnetwork.org.

We use only first names to preserve privacy.

WHY PRACTICE PENANCE?



By Paul Thigpen, Ph.D.

As Lent approaches, Catholics turn their attention once more to penitential practices: traditionally, prayer, fasting, and almsgiving. Some Protestant traditions, such as Anglicans, Lutherans, and some Methodists, observe Lent as well. But to many Christians from an Evangelical background, the very notion of *penance* seems suspect.

Pentecostals, for example, often practice prayer, fasting, and almsgiving year-round with an enthusiasm that would put many Catholics to shame. But they rarely have penance in mind when they do: Prayer is obviously a given, our ongoing conversation with God. Fasting is seen as a way to strengthen the power of prayer and to focus the one who is praying. Almsgiving is simply a reasonable response to the financial needs of various ministries.

These are of course commendable reasons for prayer, fasting, and almsgiving, and they give Catholics and Evangelical Protestants much common ground as a place for mutual understanding and shared action. But when Evangelicals inquire about Catholic practices, any discussion of Lenten traditions, it seems to me, should include an exploration of the notion of penance as well. What exactly is it, and why are Catholics called to practice it — not only during Lent, but throughout the year?

THE MEANING OF PENANCE

In Catholic tradition, the word *penance* has several meanings, all closely related.

The *virtue* we call penance is a good habit of attitude, thought, and behavior that inclines us to be sorry for our sin, to avoid sin in the future, to repair (as much as lies within our power) the consequences of our sin, and to turn wholly to God.

The *Sacrament* of Penance (or Reconciliation) is that channel of grace flowing from God through the Church by

which — through the ministry of a priest acting on Christ's behalf — sins are forgiven for a person who confesses them with true sorrow and the intention to turn away from them.

Within that same sacrament, penance is the name commonly given the action or discipline assigned by the priest confessor as a way of showing our sorrow for sin and our intention to change, and of repairing in some way the consequences of our sin.

More generally, penance refers to all the particular, concrete ways in which we show our sorrow for sin; demonstrate our intention to avoid it in the future; repair

its consequences; turn away from temptation; detach ourselves from the things that compete with God for our love; and turn ourselves more fully toward God.

In short, penance might be defined as *spiritual change that enables us sinners to turn away from sin and toward God*.

That last, brief definition is one that our Protestant brothers and sisters — including Evangelicals — would recognize and appreciate. In fact, they

would most likely see it as a definition for a word they themselves use frequently: *repentance*. Again, we find common ground here. But some Protestants, especially Evangelicals, would probably have difficulties with certain aspects of the Catholic teaching about penance as we've described it.

Laying aside for the moment the common objections many Christians have to the Sacrament of Penance, we can identify other particulars here that would give them pause. Trying to turn away from sin and back toward God is one thing, but attempts to *repair* the consequences of our sin is quite another. The problem lies in the important differences between how Christians understand the *consequences of sin*.

“... spiritual change
that enables us
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THE CONSEQUENCES OF SIN

Many Christians believe that once God forgives sin, there's nothing else to be done about it. If being "born again" or coming to faith in Christ leads to the forgiveness of sins, then all we need is faith that we are forgiven; no "good works" on our part have any role to play with relation to past sins. Of course, nearly all Christians — Catholics, Protestants, and Eastern Orthodox alike — encourage good works as a way of obeying and loving God, so we can avoid sins in the future. But sins already committed and forgiven are a different matter.

To think otherwise, such Christians may insist, is to assume that we can somehow earn God's forgiveness by our own actions and merits. On the contrary, they say, "Jesus paid it all" on the cross. All is forgiven. End of story.

Such thinking, however, misunderstands the meaning of divine *forgiveness*. In particular, it fails to recognize that sin has more than one consequence.

When we sin, we cause a break in our relationship with God. We have done damage to our friendship with Him. That damage, which may be greater or lesser, is called *guilt*.

In common ways of speaking, of course, *guilt* refers to the degree to which someone is responsible for sin (more precisely, *culpability*). But in theological terms, it refers to the injury in a relationship resulting from an offense, whether between human persons or between a human person and God.

When *forgiveness* is offered, then, the *guilt* of sin is cancelled. The one who forgives chooses to restore the relationship. As an act of grace, he takes back into favor the one who offended him. He decides that the offense will no longer "come between" him and the offender.

Nevertheless — and this is the critical insight here — guilt before God isn't the only consequence of sin. Sin also disorders our souls, our relationships, and our world. It blinds and deceives us. It leaves us weak and overly attached to things we have chosen to love more than we love God.

For all these reasons, we need more than forgiveness if we are to live with God forever, becoming like Him and seeing Him face to face (see 1 John 3:2–3). We also need to be healed, to be made whole. If we're selfish, we

must become loving. If we're deceitful, we must become truthful. If we're addicted, we must break the addictions. And if we're bitter, we must let go of others' offenses.

HEALING OUR BROKENNESS

Consider this parallel: Suppose you tell your five-year-old that he can't jump off a tall fence because he will hurt himself. But he does it anyway and breaks his arm. When he calls out to you crying in pain, he's quite remorseful for his misbehavior and afraid that your anger will alienate you from him.

At that point, you forgive him for disobeying you — that is, you lay aside your anger at his wrongdoing so that it doesn't stand between the two of you. But other consequences of his sin must still be dealt with. You must take him to the hospital to have his broken arm set, and that will be a painful process.

The truth is that we've all disobeyed God and broken some of our spiritual "bones." God forgives us of the guilt resulting from our sin, the break in our relationship with Him. He restores the friendship. But He doesn't wave a magic wand, bypassing our free will, to fix those "bones."

Instead, we must undergo a process that undoes what we have done, and it requires our cooperation. We must work, with the assistance of divine grace, to let go of whatever binds us, straighten out whatever is crooked within us, repair what is broken, restore what we have unlawfully taken, embrace whatever

truths we have denied, and learn to love God above all things. That process is what we call *penance*.

Prayer, fasting, and almsgiving are the best-known of the traditional penitential acts. But the Catholic tradition shows us many more as well that can assist us, such as accepting unavoidable adversity in this life with a serene confidence in God's providence. During this Lenten season, then, we have a fresh opportunity to cooperate with God in healing the consequences of our sin — and to help others understand why we need it. ■

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