



## October 2014 CHNewsletter

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# THE COMING HOME NETWORK INTERNATIONAL



## The Greatest Questions in Life

By Stuart Squires, Ph.D.

My father was an officer in the Army. Like all military families, we were transferred every few years, forced to plant new seeds just as the old ones were beginning to sprout. This transient life shaped me in more ways than I can imagine. Religiously, we had to find a new church each time we moved. We tasted a variety of denominations, but the churches we finally claimed as our own were chosen based on how welcoming they were. Questions of truth were secondary to the quality of the organ music, candlelight Christmas Eve services, and the warmth of the pastor and congregants. Although we would go to church one or two Sundays each month, my family was only nominally Protestant and, therefore, I received little religious formation.

When I was about ten years old, my mother told my sister and me that we were going to be baptized that following Sunday at the Methodist church. I can't remember if I knew that I wasn't already, but the thought of being baptized had no meaning for me. After we circled around the font with a few other families, I was sprinkled with the water of regeneration. Rather than being a significant moment for me, I recall thinking to myself, "I just want to go sit down. I wish all of these people would stop looking at me!" Such was the thinking of a ten-year-old boy.

### Wanting to belong

We moved to Lawrence, Kansas just as I entered those bewildering teenage years (*Lord, have mer-*

*cy*). I became friends with two boys, Kyle and Ben, who, I would later learn, went to church together and had a set of friends whom I did not know. My jealousy raged (*Christ, have mercy*). I was hurt that I was excluded from something precious that I did not share with them. As we were walking back to my house one day after playing golf, I asked Kyle if I could go to church with him that Sunday — not because I wanted to grow closer to God, but out of selfish desires (*Lord, have mercy*).

Despite this inauspicious beginning, I fell in love with the Southside Church of Christ. I immersed myself in all of the youth activities and quickly gained a close group of friends, no small victory for an awkward teen who was nine inches taller than all of his peers. *Continued on page 2* ➤

Journeys Home

## ...Journeys Home Continued...

Within the year, I was baptized a second time, because I did not consider my first baptism “legitimate” as I had not made a “true” conversion to Christ. Such was the thinking of a thirteen-year-old boy.

### Things fall apart

While I was basking in the afterglow of my newfound love for Christ, Southside imploded. Just a few months after my baptism, there was a division among the congregants about some ecclesial matter that, to this day, is unclear to me. About 75 people — including Kyle’s family and most families with children my age — broke away to form the Wheatland Church of Christ. Despite my zeal for Southside, I left.

It would be unfair of me to say that this division alone caused my turn away from Christ. I wonder if I had fully given myself to Him. I wonder if I simply had felt invigorated by the charisma of those who embraced me. I wonder if the dread and despair of my teen years inevitably crushed whatever small devotion I had. I don’t know. Although I continued to go to our newly formed church until I left for college, my faith had evaporated.

In many ways, my teenage years were cliché. I felt jaded and disaffected by the world and all of its empty promises. I spent my nights playing the same Pink Floyd songs over and over again until sunrise trying to imitate David Gilmour’s guitar licks on my Telecaster, never quite getting them right. My new friends were far from exemplars of integrity. But, then again, so was I. One Saturday night, when I was about 15, we were wandering around with no particular aim in mind. Heading back to my friend’s house, we spotted a Ford Mustang in his neighbor’s

driveway. We opened the door, climbed in, and saw a Pioneer tape deck in the dashboard. Egging each other on, we swiped it and ran. What were we going to do with a tape deck? None of us drove our own cars. We certainly weren’t organized criminals who could sell it on the black market. Alone, I would not have done it. I only wanted to be part of something...anything.

### A spiritual itch

I came to Chicago for college percolating with anticipation. I had no idea what I wanted to study, or whom I wanted to become. All I knew was that I wanted. Desperately. Fantasies of losing myself in the blues scene beckoned me, and fantasies of a woman losing herself in me fogged my imagination. Neither happened.

At the end of my sophomore year, I took a comparative religions class. I knew nothing about different religions, but they fascinated me. We studied many traditions, but it was Buddhism that called my world into question. It could not be placed on the spectrum of Western thought (as I understood it), and I was compelled to learn more. The following year, I enrolled in a course on Buddhism and, by the end of it, knew that I needed to get my degree in religious studies and spend my time asking the great questions of life: How do we know what we know? Is there one Truth, or many? Does God exist? I took classes on every religious tradition I could, but the questions outnumbered the answers.

During my studies, I came to know a group of professors who had a profound impact on me. I had met many intelligent scholars at DePaul, but these men were different. While the breadth and depth of their knowledge of ethics, *Continued on page 5* ➤

## FEATURED RESOURCES



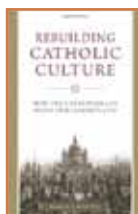
### Roses Among Thorns

— By St. Francis de Sales

This short, practical guide will develop in you the soul-nourishing habits that lead to sanctity. As he did for saints and sinners in his own time, St. Francis de Sales will stiffen your resolve, help you gain small victories over unruly passions, and restore in you a trusting confidence in Jesus Christ. Absorb the wisdom in these holy pages, and you’ll soon make true progress on your spiritual journey and navigate with confidence the treacherous waters of our secular world.

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### Rebuilding Catholic Culture

— By Ryan Topping

Rarely does a book come along that so succinctly explains the decline of modern culture, articulates a defense of the Church’s teachings, and offers a hope-filled path for building a civilization grounded in Catholic truth. In *Rebuilding Catholic Culture*, you’ll also discover sensible ways to begin restoring Catholic culture — right now — in your own life and family, and in our larger communities as well. This profoundly accessible book will renew your confidence in the world-transforming character of our Creed and in the potency of our Faith to shape and redefine the culture of the West.

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# A Culture Divided, a Church United?

By Kenneth J. Howell, Ph.D.

The call for Christian unity resounds more loudly than ever. In what appears to be a disintegrating culture, unity among Christians may be the one source of real hope.



Many observant Christians today are troubled by the fragmentation of American life and the erosion of the moral fabric of the West. In the last decade in the United States we have seen an intensified divisiveness in American public discourse that rivals anytime since the Civil War. Americans seem more divided than ever. Nor is the situation any more promising among Christian churches. Many of those denominations once called mainline are now receding into obscurity as their memberships dwindle and their moorings unfasten from anything rooted in classical Christian doctrine and morals. The recent vote in the Church of England to ordain women as bishops has sent troubling signs to the Catholic Church and its hierarchy that the years of discussion between the two ecclesial bodies may now be permanently damaged.

Among the spectrum of churches that dub themselves independent, non-denominational, and charismatic, there is a wide range of theologies and views that sometimes seem irreconcilable. While such churches often affirm the uniqueness and primacy of salvation in Christ, there seems to be little else that unifies them. Amidst all this diversity and confusion somehow Christians have to find their moorings, to drop their anchor and fasten onto a sure rock from which they can search for greater peace and unity among Christians.

The time seems ripe for Christians of any creed to reconsider the roots of unity and to ground themselves once again in the historic witness of Scripture and Christian history. Questions about unity stand at the center of this inquiry because the problem lies not only in the unresolved differences among Christians but even in the differing understandings of what unity is. How exactly should Christians view the search for greater unity? What does unity consist of? Even if we can agree on what unity is, what practical steps can be suggested to pursue unity?

One obvious problem lies in the mandate for unity. Is there a mandate from God to have more Christian unity? Is Christian unity an optional nicety that Christians may have if convenient or a command from God that must be pursued? It all depends on how you read the New Testament. One of the deepest divides among Christians is whether the Church in the New Testament

possessed/possesses a spiritual oneness that is enough for unity or whether it also includes an institutional unity that manifests the spiritual oneness in Christ. On the one side are Evangelical Christians of independent leanings that often insist we already have unity through our common belief in Christ. For them, that is enough. On the other are historic Lutheran, Catholic, and Orthodox churches which insist that unity is always expressed through unity in a common faith and liturgy. For these churches Christian unity cannot be had without unity in faith (creeds), liturgy, and moral teaching.

Since all historic believers take the New Testament as the word of the living God, they must always return to its pages with fresh eyes and an open mind to rediscover its teachings on unity. Space does not permit me to offer an exegesis of the key passages but every Christian must grapple with classic texts like John chapter seventeen, I Corinthians 1:10-18, 12:1-28, and Ephesians 4:1-14. The need for a fresh reading

is twofold. These New Testament texts will always be the foundation of Christian faith and cannot be jettisoned in favor of some supposed better understanding that ignores the meaning of these texts. In addition, we may have read these texts wrongly and so misunderstood them. If we

remain in our ignorance, we may never find our way out of the labyrinth of disunity. Just as the Constitution of the United States will always function as a bellweather for our democracy — and can never be set aside or reinterpreted into irrelevance — so the New Testament must always be the anchor for Christian unity.

A second factor plays into the search for greater unity, the role of Christian history. Ours is not the first generation to face the problem of disunity among Christians. In fact, almost every generation of Christ's disciples has confronted this problem. A sensitive reading of the Letter of First John reveals an underlying problem of schism and heresy, as do several other letters in the New Testament. But the same problem surfaced again in the third century with the Novatian and Donatist schisms, the latter persisting into the time of St. Augustine. Time and time again the two-sided coin of heresy and schism menaced the Church. Even if one believes in Scripture alone as the final authority, it would be foolhardy to ignore these historical struggles as case studies for understanding Christian unity. *Continued on page 4* ➤

John 17  
1 Corinthians 1:10-18  
1 Corinthians 12:1-28  
Ephesians 4:1-14

Both Scripture and Church history have much to illumine this perennial problem. Let me share some important lessons.

First, the temptation is always present to treat the problem of unity on the model of political negotiation where one expects to find give-and-take among discussants. Yet, Christian unity is not a negotiated peace among warring Christians. Unity is a gift *from* God and a metaphysical reality *in* God. God Himself is the source of all unity for the Church because all the original unity and diversity rests in God. To understand this point, go back to the foundations of the world. Imagine what existed before the universe was created. All there was was God. All created reality, both physical and spiritual, derives from God Himself. And while God could have created the universe in any way He pleased, He chose to have reality reflect and embody His triune nature. Nicene Christians believe that this God, their God, was eternally One in Three or Three in One. Diversity and unity are both in God already. And this God — one nature in three persons — is perfect in all His attributes.

The trinitarian nature of God implies that the perfection of love is in God, as the apostle John says, “God is love” and all love comes from God. He is the source and summit of love. Yet, God is also truth. The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit all agree on truth and love one another in the truth they are. For us human beings, truth is something external to us; it does not arise from our inner being; we must bring in truth from the outside. In God, however, truth is not something external to Him as Plato may have thought. Rather, God is the source of all human truth; truth is internal to God and is equally shared by the three Persons of the Trinity.

The implications of God’s trinitarian Being are profound. The unity of Christians then is not a human creation, much less a negotiated peace. The unity God desires for the Church is a gift of God Himself. The search for unity is not really a process of compromises but a voluntary relinquishing of mistaken ideas about unity to embrace a greater truth that can liberate Christians from our time-bound ideas. The unity we should be seeking is the presence of God Himself in the hearts of the faithful to bind them together more fully and to enfold them more completely into the body of Christ.

A second implication involves distinguishing the inner core of unity and truth from the outward expressions of that unity and truth. The Church has always been diverse and contained many expressions of liturgy, piety, and orders of service. Part of St. John Paul II’s emphasis in his *Orientalis Lumen* (1995) was a call for the Church “to breathe with both lungs.” The Church cannot experience the fullness of Christ’s teaching without the profound contributions of the East and the West. Even within the western Patriarchate under the Pope as the Bishop of Rome, there were small variations in liturgy and wide variations in piety well into the early modern period. Still today, the Ambrosian liturgy is the officially sanctioned one in the Archdiocese of Milan. The great variety of religious orders and charisms in the West attests to the value the Church has always placed on properly constituted diversity. The Church has never been monolithic.

Yet, the Church has always been one in her core and inner dynamism. That oneness lies in the presence of the Holy Spirit as the active agent in creating love among the brethren and forging bonds of unity. The Spirit moves in the hearts of the faithful who are properly ordered under their pastoral leaders to inspire and create communities of service to reach out into the world. That same Spirit guides the Church in her deliberations over matters of doctrine and morals. Even the diverse expressions of the faith in East and West must yield to a unified expression of the faith so that there may be true oneness in doctrine. Liturgies may contain differing expressions but the same faith must be the core of those outward forms.

There is a mandate for unity, not only because it is taught in the New Testament, but because God Himself is a unity of three Persons in one nature. Yet, the necessity for Christian unity also lies in the Incarnation, in the act of God becoming man. When John proclaims that the Word (Logos) became flesh, it was a declaration that God intended to unite all humanity in the person of His Son, the Word of God. Over time the Church realized the full significance of this truth by proclaiming Jesus Christ as fully God and fully man. Had the apostles proclaimed Jesus as half God and half man, the gospel would not have changed the world. It would have been just another variation on the theme in Greek mythology in which the gods became human by becoming less divine and humans became like the gods by shedding their mortal humanity. But when Christians proclaimed Jesus as one-hundred percent God and one-hundred percent man, they offered the first real hope of uniting all humanity into one. That was the very message that the sagacious St. Athanasius saw in the *On the Incarnation of the Word* as the lynchpin of our faith. By the Logos becoming man and dying for all, the God-Man Jesus Christ absorbed all humanity into Himself and provided the foundation for unity in the Church.

Since the Church is Christ’s body in the world, the Church is now the instrument for uniting all with one another and ultimately with God. That same Incarnate God, Jesus Christ, is still at work today helping us to maintain the bond of peace. He accomplishes this work of unification through the active ministry of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit, called the soul of the Church by many Church Fathers, animates the visible body of Christ to bring Christ’s disciples together and to urge them on to greater unity.

In the light of these central truths, what is our responsibility as members of Christ’s Body, the Church, in promoting Christian unity? It would be easy to outline platitudes for us all but ultimately the practical work of unity must be engaged. What is that practical work? Contrary to our activist inclinations, the most practical thing we can do is to pray for unity. Remember that unity is a gift but God usually gives His gifts only to those who ask (Mt 7:7-11) and especially to those who beg unceasingly (cf. Lk 18:1-18). Divine unity will only be achieved through the outpouring of God into the Church. That’s the most practical thing we can do. ■

## Barriers to Conversion

By Marcus Grodi

*“And when I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also. And you know the way where I am going.”*

*John 14:3-4*



“Why don’t committed Christians like Billy Graham or James Dobson come home to the Catholic Church?”

I can’t tell you how many times over the past twenty years I’ve heard questions like this. Or consider this one: “My brother knows all about the Catholic Faith — he’s a Protestant theologian and has nothing but good things to say about the Church — but he doesn’t seem the least bit interested in converting.”

As a result of our twenty years of helping non-Catholic Christians at least consider the beauty and truth of the Catholic Church, we’ve come up with a list of “Barriers to Conversion.” We don’t claim this list to be all-inclusive or definitive; rather, it simply summarizes the responses we’ve heard from people on the journey. The items are not necessarily in the order of importance, but I do believe that the first five rank at the top:

1. Sin
2. The Mystery of God’s Grace
3. Ignorance
4. Prejudice
5. Bad Catholics
6. Discontent
7. Content
8. Indifference
9. Anxiety
10. Attachment to a Tradition
11. Attachment to a Person
12. Attachment to Self
13. Can’t Forgive Others
14. Can’t Forgive Self
15. Just Can’t!
16. Just Won’t!!!

Now each of these items deserves explanation, but I suspect that as you consider each item, you may see how they apply to the resistance of friends or family to the Church. Of course, none of us knows what any other person is really thinking, so we certainly can’t judge — and it may be, in the end, that the primary reason whether anyone converts depends on the mystery of God’s will and timing. Billy Graham and James Dobson, as well as Rick Warren, Joel Osteen, and governor Mike Huckabee, may be precisely where God wants them to serve. This doesn’t

mean we quit sharing with them the truth and beauty of the Church; rather, we at least begin by celebrating with them their faith and surrender to Jesus Christ.

Recently, two experiences brought home to me what I consider the two primary “Barriers to Conversion” (not itemized in the list), and this, I believe, reiterates the significance of our mission. My family and I were driving home from the local County fair (which, frankly, is hardly a semblance of what county fairs used to be!), and the radio was on. First, I heard a non-Catholic Christian radio commentator addressing the rise of radical Islam and the increasing rejection of Christianity in our culture, particularly with the removal of Bibles from hotels, spurred on by radical atheist groups. Everything he was saying was spot on, but his generic use of the word “church” reminded me of what I consider the primary reason so few well-informed non-Catholic Christians come home: because they don’t believe in the necessity of any church, let alone the Catholic Church, for salvation. Following the lead of Martin Luther and John Calvin, they believe salvation is only a matter of an individual’s faith in Jesus, and that the “church” is the invisible multitude of sincere believers, known only to God. Whether a person belongs to a church let alone any specific church is immaterial to salvation.

This is what I believed from my childhood Lutheran upbringing through my seminary training and on into my Presbyterian pastoral years — and this is why *hearing* 1 Timothy 3:14-15 began my “journey home.” Saint Paul said that the “church of the living God” is the “pillar and bulwark of the truth.” I had always presumed that the *Bible* was this “pillar and bulwark.” This verse didn’t make me Catholic; but it shocked me, because it had never crossed my mind that any church was necessary to know truth, let alone as a means of salvation.

Driving along home from the fair, I switched the channel, and heard governor Mike Huckabee waxing eloquently in praise of the Vatican’s call for active military efforts to stop radical Islam. As you may not know, governor Huckabee was an ordained Southern Baptist minister before he set this aside to enter into politics. He remains an outspoken Evangelical, but also a politician, so it’s hard to discern from his words his actual feelings about the Pope and the Vatican. *Continued on page B* ▶

But it reminded me that another primary barrier to conversion, maybe the biggest, is not just ignorance of the mandate concerning membership in the Church, but the deep underlying suspicion that the Catholic Church and Catholics are not truly Christians. In our apologetic defense of the Church, we can point out all the flaws of *sola Scriptura*, *sola fide*, *solus Christus*, etc., and clarify all the actual teachings and historical foundations of Catholicism, and augment this with heart-warming conversion stories, but if our separated brethren still question in their hearts whether modern Catholics are truly Christians, they will rarely sense the mandate to consider converting.

As the result of the twenty years of our work, I have come to believe that addressing these two primary barriers sets the tone and trajectory of our future work together, and maybe the uniqueness of our mission: What can we do, through our media, studio productions, publications, and website, to help our separated brothers and sisters come to know that we Catholics are truly Christians? How can we fill in the gaps of their ignorance, correct the misunderstandings of their prejudice, explain the failures of “bad Catholics” (like *moi*), so they can see that we, too, believe that we are saved by grace through faith in Jesus Christ? In many ways, it seems this is precisely what our present Holy Father is doing: he’s not downplaying or negating any of the essentials of our faith, but

rather focusing on that most important truth which we share with our baptized brethren: that no one comes to the Father except through Jesus Christ, His Son and our Lord. If we can help some to *hear* this, then maybe through our love, the Holy Spirit can help them *hear* the necessity of the Church our Lord established in His hand-chosen apostles, centered around the leadership of Peter. For those who come to desire to explore more about becoming Catholic, especially non-Catholic clergy whose conversions can mean severe disruption in their families, marriages, and vocations, we are here to help them discern what God is now calling them to do.

I would also suggest that our work will continue to help convert Catholics, because the New Evangelization will never start until Catholics-in-the-pews on Sunday morning fully realize that everything essential in our Catholic Faith is built upon faith in Jesus Christ and His intention to form a Church. It is our concerted hope that our resources will help Catholics re-discover their faith in Christ and why they need to remain active members of the Church, equipping them to be authentic evangelizers. As our Lord told His apostles, He has gone to prepare a place — a home — for us, and *coming home* means at the core helping people reach their eternal home through the fullness of faith in Jesus Christ, non-Catholics as well as Catholics, clergy as well as laity. ■

## NEWSLETTER DONATION

The CHNewsletter is our primary means of outreach and communication. We request a yearly tax-deductible gift in the amount of \$35 or more to continue receiving the newsletter and remain a supporting member of the CHNetwork.

## FORUM!

Check out CHNetwork’s online forum. The forum is a wonderful place to connect with other CHNetwork members, ask questions about the Catholic Faith, and browse through archived discussions on a wide variety of topics related to the Catholic Church. Go to <http://forum.chnetwork.org>.

## SUPPORT CHNETWORK

For your convenience, CHNetwork is able to automatically deduct monthly donations directly from your credit card, checking, or savings account. If you would like to set up an automatic monthly donation, please go to [chnetwork.org/donate/](http://chnetwork.org/donate/) or complete this form and mail to:

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# Prayer List



## Clergy

- For an Assemblies of God pastor in Kansas, that he and his wife may be given a hunger for Jesus in the Holy Eucharist.
- For Justin, a minister in Canada, that he may find the truth he is seeking in Christ's holy Catholic Church.
- For an Anglican priest in Indiana, that his love for things Catholic and the grace of the Holy Spirit would guide him home to full-communication with the successor of St. Peter.
- For Don, a lay-minister in California, that God would increase his desire for the fullness of the faith drawing him into the fellowship of the Catholic Church.
- For a transitional Anglican deacon in Wisconsin, that our Lord Jesus would reveal to him the proper time and circumstances for his reception into the Catholic Church.
- For Aaron, a minister in the South, that the Holy Spirit would anoint and guide him as he studies the teaching of the Catholic Church in preparation for his Confirmation.
- For a Charismatic Bible teacher in Puerto Rico, that his love for the Holy Scriptures and faithfulness to their

teaching would bring him to the fullness of Catholic truth.

- For Bobby, a former Southern Baptist seminarian, that God would grant him the grace and wisdom in sharing the truth of the Catholic Faith with his wife.
- For Norman, a former Independent Baptist minister, that as he discovers the truth of Catholic teaching he may discard the misinformation he formerly believed about the Church.
- For a Presbyterian music minister in Georgia, that her love for Jesus and His blessed mother Mary would guide her home to the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church.

## Laitiy

- For Suzi, that our Lord Jesus continue to draw her deeper in her faith journey.
- For David, who is connecting better with local Catholics and had a powerful spiritual experience that encouraged him in his faith walk.
- For Pam, that she be able to resolve the struggles and questions she has regarding the Catholic Faith.
- For Mike, who is happy that he has found an excellent parish, that his RCIA experience be helpful and fruitful.

■ For Diane, who is struggling with the decision to convert on account of her lifelong faith as a Protestant.

- For a former Mormon who was confirmed at Easter, that his wife be willing to continue learning about the Catholic Church.
- For Doug, that he be able to discern the Holy Spirit's leading as to whether to move forward with his interest in Catholicism.
- For Jennifer, that her husband be more open to her interest in the Catholic Church.
- For Bruce, a convert, that his family come to share his love for the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church.
- For Phyllis, that, as she watches EWTN and reads about Catholic teaching, Jesus strengthens her faith and makes clear the direction of her journey.
- For Karen who has been attracted to the Catholic Church since she was young, that her faith journey not negatively impact her loved ones.

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 CHNetwork Prayer List, PO Box 8290, Zanesville, OH 43702 or email prayer requests to [prayers@chnetwork.org](mailto:prayers@chnetwork.org).

We use only first names to preserve privacy.

**Please also pray for the Coming Home Network International's staff and Board of Directors.**

**President/Founder,** Marcus Grodi (former Presbyterian pastor)

**Chief Operating Officer,** Kevin Lowry (former Presbyterian)

**Resident Theologian,** Dr. Kenneth Howell (former Presbyterian pastor)

**Senior Advisor: History & Theology,** Jim Anderson (former Lutheran)

**Director of Studio/Media,** Scott Scholten (former Presbyterian)

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**Publications and Laity Coordinator,** Mary Clare Pieczynski

**Manager of Outreach,** JonMarc Grodi

**Financial Assistant,** Wendy Hart (former United Methodist)

**Board of Directors:** Marcus Grodi (President), Msgr. Frank Lane (Chaplain), Dr. Robert Geiger (Vice President), Dr. Charles Feicht (Secretary), Bruce Sullivan

(Treasurer), Dr. Marian Schuda (Director), Donald Brey (Director)



## ...Journeys Home Continued...

► “Journeys Home” continued from page 2

psychology, and Sanskrit overwhelmed me, the wisdom they possessed drew me towards them. Although they knew different religious traditions well, they had placed their lives in the hands of the Catholic Church. I was mesmerized by how they had successfully navigated the waters of the intellectual life and, somehow, had not run aground on the shores of a facile relativism. I wanted to be like them. I wanted to be them. It was irrelevant to me, however, that Catholicism was their refuge. *What* they proclaimed as truth was less important to me than *that* they proclaimed any truth at all. While I was only open to their insights about the complexities of life, nevertheless, a Catholic seed was planted and began to grow, though only gradually.

My senior year, I decided to write my thesis on the function of music in the Catholic Funeral Mass. Part of this thesis mandated that I spend the next six months observing the Mass, which, like many people encountering it for the first time, I found distasteful. I had no idea what was going on and, because many songs were sung and prayers were offered from memory, it felt like an exclusive club that did not welcome outsiders. I banished this thought to the back of my mind because I was less interested in the Mass itself and more interested in the music and what the music conveyed about the meaning of death (as if these three ever could be separated from each other). It was largely because of this thesis that I realized I was not ready for graduate school. So, I joined the Peace Corps.

### The Postmodern man

I was sent to the Islamic Republic of Mauritania where I taught English for two years at the Lycée d'Aleg. The Peace Corps was a powerful experience that tattooed its mark on me. I witnessed overflowing generosity from those with very little, and the strength of the human spirit in a seemingly hopeless situation. I also witnessed crippling poverty, the debasement of women, and slavery. But, while I was immersed in foreign languages and foreign customs in a foreign land, I realized how foreign I was to myself. Who am I? What do I believe? Why am I here? These questions haunted me, and I finally surrendered to the call that I needed to spend my life chasing answers.

I enrolled at the University of Chicago Divinity School and began to study Christian theology, becoming absorbed in the pamphlet wars of the 16<sup>th</sup> century between Protestants like Luther and Calvin and Catholics like Erasmus and Sadoleto. They wrote with such urgency about salvation that I became transfixed with rapt attention. Personally, however, I told myself that this was only an academic exercise; these debates had no bearing on my life because, long ago, I ceased to recognize Christ as fully human and fully divine.

While in Hyde Park, I learned a vocabulary that described my worldview that I had had since I was a teenager. I came to understand that I was the quintessential “Postmodern” man. I believed all the hallmarks that this *Continued on page 6* ►

## Thoughts From Br. Rex Anthony Norris

Little Portion Hermitage | [littleportionhermitage.org](http://littleportionhermitage.org)



Nearly every morning I begin my day seated in a rocker, peering out the east-facing windows of the hermitage, enjoying a cup of coffee and watching the sun rise. Almost without fail, the breath-taking beauty of the sun rising over this part of God's creation brings to mind a prayer I learned as a Protestant.

*New every morning is your love, great God of light,  
and all day long you are working for good in the world.  
Stir up in us desire to serve you,  
to live peacefully with our neighbors,  
and to devote each day to your Son,  
our Savior, Jesus Christ the Lord. Amen.<sup>1</sup>*

It occurred to me recently that this prayer captures in a poetic way the mission and ministry of the Coming Home Network International. Each of the staff members of this apostolate have but one goal in mind — to devote their time, energy, and talents to our savior Jesus Christ by serving those drawn by the God of Light to learn more about the Catholic Church founded by Christ and rooted in Him in order to proclaim the fullness and splendor of Truth.

Be assured of my prayers for you. Please remember to pray for me, a sinner upon whom the Lord has looked with mercy. ■

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<sup>1</sup> Taken from the United Methodist Hymnal, a ritual for Morning Prayer and Praise, page #877.



## ...Journeys Home Continued...

intellectual trend of our age proclaims: the certainty of uncertainty, suspicion of authority, the rejection of universal truth, relativism, disdain for all rules, self-generated meaning, skepticism, the deification of the individual, perspectivism, and, what I like to call, the “democracy of truth.”

### Burned out

Ironically, the University of Chicago (that Temple of Postmodernity) brought me closer to the Catholic Church in two ways. First, like forcing a child to smoke a carton of cigarettes so that he will never want to look at another cigarette again, I became sick on the “dictatorship of relativism” and needed to purge myself of that poison. Second, Luther and Calvin had convinced me of the necessity of grace because of the weakness of humanity. I did not know, however, that this Protestant understanding of grace derived from the Catholic Doctor of Grace, Augustine of Hippo. I ached for grace, because “what ought to be more attractive to us sick men, than grace, grace by which we are healed; for us lazy men, than grace, grace by which we are stirred up; for us men longing to act, than grace, by which we are helped?” (St. Augustine, Ep. 186, xii, 39)

But, I had no idea where to find grace.

### Truth manifest

I moved to Washington, DC and began my Ph.D. course work at The Catholic University of America, because I knew from my time at DePaul that a Catholic school would provide a much healthier atmosphere. Over the next few years, I sat at the feet of the Church Fathers — especially Augustine — and soaked in the teachings of the Tradition. My studies pulled me to the door of the Catholic Church, but more than an intellectual ascent was needed to bring about a conversion of the heart.

When I was in school, there was nothing I wanted more than to be a mystic. I wanted a direct experience — a direct union — with God. I rejected mediated experiences of God as shallow and flawed because they are always culturally constructed. The Bible, for example, was written in Hebrew and Greek, but at the time I could only read English translations. I knew that this linguistic barrier caused a disconnect between my understanding of Scripture and the fullness of what God had to say.

I believed what Pseudo-Dionysius, the great 6<sup>th</sup> century Byzantine mystic, said about the only way that one can truly know God: “leave behind you everything perceived and understood, everything perceptible and understandable, all that is not and all that is, and, with your understanding laid aside, strive upward — as much as you can — toward union with him who is beyond all being and knowledge. By an undivided and absolute abandonment of yourself and everything, shedding all and freed from all, you will be lifted to the ray of the divine shadow which is above everything that is.” Such romantic words made me swoon.

Anyone who knows me, though, would tell you that I don’t have a mystical bone in my body. I thought, however, that I

could do the next best thing. I read all the notable mystics of the Christian tradition, such as Henry Suso, Mechtild of Magdeburg, and Margery Kempe. But, while reading them, I always thought to myself: “I have no idea what you people are talking about!”

I don’t know when it happened, but I came to realize that mediated experience was not to be shunned in favor of the mystical. Rather, our relationship with God *must* be mediated through materiality and the culturally constructed avenues that speak to us. I began to seek out every physical experience of God that I could encounter: God — mediated through the smell of the incense that tickled my nose in the cathedrals of Europe; God — mediated through the haunting melody of *Amazing Grace*; God — mediated through the grittiness of the ashes that were spread on my forehead at my first Ash Wednesday Mass.

And so, the radical message that the immaterial God became material in the person of Jesus Christ finally began to make sense to me. I came to understand that God became physical because this is how we relate to Him.

### Love manifest

Painfully, though, I still felt a divide between God and me because even Jesus was culturally constructed, but in such a way that did not communicate to me. He was a first-century, Jewish, Aramaic-speaking, manual-laborer. I am none of those things. How am I supposed to relate to such a man?

As if speaking directly to me, God answered: “fine, if Christmas isn’t good enough for you, I will go one step farther; I will become the food you eat, removing all barriers between us by entering you through that which you need most.” God chose to join Himself to us through the physicality of the Eucharist, and, in doing so, nourishes us spiritually. By this spiritual nourishment, He gives us life.

What finally pushed me over the threshold to Catholicism, and into the Church at the Vigil of 2011, was not any theological argument, but a longing for the grace found in the Eucharist. I had been going to Mass for many years yet, each week, remained seated while Catholics received the Blessed Sacrament. At first, the dissonance I felt observing everyone approach the priest, while I sat in the pew, seemed to be a fitting symbol for my relationship with the Church — strangely, the discord brought comfort. Slowly, however, I came to feel in the depths of my being that the bread and wine truly, really, and substantially become the Body and Blood, Soul and Divinity of Jesus Christ. Comfort was replaced by a yearning to consume Jesus, so that Jesus will consume me.

### Taste and see that the Lord is good

During the Mass when I received my first communion and confirmation, I approached Fr. O’Connor, who had walked with us each Tuesday evening during our RCIA journey, and he said “Augustine, the Body of Christ” as he held up the Host. The young Jesuit looked me in the eye as he said my new confirma-

## ...Journeys Home Continued...

tion name. This caught me off guard. Did he forget my name? I later understood that my new name told me that I was leaving my old identity — my old life — behind. I was no longer only the son of Steve and Marti; I was receiving the completion of my baptismal grace and becoming more fully bound to God. I was His adopted son, just like Augustine himself, like Newman, like Merton, and like the cloud of witnesses whose names were echoing through the nave as the choir sang the Litany of the Saints.

Offering a deep bow, I gave a resounding “Amen.” I had been anticipating this moment for a long time and was finally ready to receive God, and let Him wash over me. As I tasted, the first thought that came into my mind was “Wow, this really does taste like cardboard.” I had heard Catholics say this many times, but I never gave it much thought. I wasn’t expecting anything magical, and I knew that I wouldn’t be healed of all my wounds, but I was disappointed that I did not have a more refined reaction to such a significant moment in my life. Is that the best I could come up with?

I pressed the Host to the roof of my mouth until it snapped, just as my sins had done to His Body 2,000 years ago on the cross.

After Mass, a reception was held in the church basement that evolved into a dance party. What else could we do on this night other than dance? The next day, I went to my friend Barbara’s house for Easter dinner and shared a meal with my new Catholic family. During the meal, the thought popped into my mind: “the Host tastes like cardboard.” Once again, I dismissed the thought as irrelevant. On Easter Monday, the thought came to my mind: “the Host tastes like cardboard.” Why can’t I get this thought out of my head? All week long, this same thought repeated in my brain.

I realized that the stale taste was teaching me. Other Christian communities will gather once a month and have a pot-luck feast as a communion meal. This type of communion meal twists the theology of what Christ was telling His disciples in the Upper Room. When you leave such a meal, you are physically sated, often with a warm wine buzz. But, this implies that physical satisfaction is the ultimate goal of the Eucharistic meal; or, that the creation of a community through table fellowship is all that matters. The empty taste of the wafer was pointing me to the full meaning of the Eucharistic meal: this bread will not physically satisfy; it is the food that nourishes the soul.

A few months ago, I went to a funeral of a miscarried baby lost by two high school friends of mine, who are not Catholic. Although the service — led by a Unitarian woman at a funeral parlor — was pleasant enough, something was eating at me, but I couldn’t figure out what it was. Later, I realized that what bothered me so much was the absence of the Eucharist. The service felt sterile to me because God was not made manifest. Through this funeral service, all we were being told was that we were in the presence of death. God — first coming to us in the physicality of Jesus Christ, then coming under the guise of bread and

wine — was not there to assure me that, even when death reigns all around us, we live because Christ is resurrected.

I have never craved the Eucharist more than I did that night. ■



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### BLOG

Please visit [www.chnetwork.org/blog](http://www.chnetwork.org/blog) to comment on and discuss this story!

## SPECIAL PRAYER

The CHNetwork receives numerous requests each week for prayers. Some intentions are for those on the journey to the Catholic Church while many others are for health, finances, and personal needs. Since space prevents us from listing each request, we ask the CHNetwork membership to join us in praying for these intentions during the month of October.

The following prayer was given to us by a CHNetwork member who asks for prayers for his grandson, Reid Hudson. We share it here in hopes that you will find it helpful in praying for your own intentions and for those who contact the CHNetwork.

*O most beautiful flower of Mt. Carmel, splendor of heaven, Blessed Mother of the Son of God, immaculate Virgin, assist me in this necessity (make your request).*

*O Star of the Sea help me, and show me that you are my Mother.*

*O holy Mary, Mother of God, queen of heaven and earth, I humbly appeal to you from the bottom of my heart to help me with this request. There are none that can withstand your power. Please show me that you are my Mother.*

*Say the following three times:*

*O Mary, conceived without sin, pray for us who have recourse to thee.*

*O holy Mary, sweet Mother, I place this intention in your hands.*

*Thank you for your mercy to me and mine. Amen.*

# The Coming Home Network International

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## SHARE YOUR STORY!

The CHNetwork **always welcomes** those of our members who are converts or reverts to share their **written conversion stories** of how they were drawn (or drawn back) to the Catholic Church.

If you feel called to share your story, please feel free to go to [chnetwork.org/converts](http://chnetwork.org/converts) to review our writer's guidelines, see sample stories, and upload your testimony.