



December 2023 CHNewsletter

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THE COMING HOME NETWORK INTERNATIONAL

Journeys Home

Taste and See: My Journey to the Catholic Church

By Gina Gentile

I was baptized as a baby on Palm Sunday, 1975, at First United Methodist Church in Dayton, OH. First UMC was my grandparents’ church, and my parents attended there when I was a young child. I learned about Jesus and God through Bible stories shown on flannelgraph in Sunday school. My grandmother would pray with me before meals, and before bed, when I would spend the night with her. Following her example, I would pray by myself for my family and extended family each night at bedtime. Through these early experiences, a belief in God was instilled in me. I believed He was real, but didn’t know how to incorporate him into my life beyond just asking him for things when I prayed.



Early Years

By the time I was a teenager, I had no interest in going to church, but during my sophomore year of high school, the Lord used the circumstances of friends and the ups and downs of life to start drawing me to Himself. The high school scene was filled with partying, and I was becoming increasingly uncomfortable with this. As I watched friends wholeheartedly embrace the party scene, I began to feel alone, and on a deeper level, unknown.

I started going to Young Life, an Evangelical ministry to teenagers. At Young Life’s weekly meeting, I met college-aged leaders who built relationships with me. I will forever remember walking down the stairs after school one day and hearing someone call out my name. It was a Young Life leader, Kathy, whom I had only met on one previous occasion. I couldn’t believe she remembered my name! There was something different about Kathy — a deep joy and contentment. I wanted that too. I felt like I had what most teens wanted: good grades, a stable home life, and friends. But there was something missing. The more that I went to Young Life and spent time with Kathy, the

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...Journeys Home Continued...

more I suspected that it had something to do with God. My developing relationship with God was very transactional. I made deals with God constantly—“Help me get through with these tests and my track meet this week, and I won’t ask you for anything ever again”—only to find myself praying the same prayer the next week.

A Personal Relationship

In June of 1991, when I was 16, I went to a week long summer camp with Young Life. I went looking for answers to questions like “How can I know God?” and “How can I have Him in my life?” Every night of that week, a speaker shared who Jesus was. I learned that Jesus was God with skin on, and that he came to earth and experienced everything humans experience—everything that I was experiencing. He knew what it was like to struggle and have difficulty and be betrayed by friends. Feeling so unknown, it was very appealing to think that Jesus knew the real me, understood me, and yet still loved me. I knew that sin separated me from God and understood that Jesus’ death on the cross was what made it possible for me to have a personal relationship with God. I asked Jesus for forgiveness for my sins and for him to live in my heart on June 21, 1991 and “became a Christian” that night. I remember having such peace and knowing that somehow “everything was going to be okay,” because the Lord was close and intimate—in my heart, not distant and uninvolved.

While the Young Life leaders and friends were happy for me and there was much excitement over a new believer, I remember thinking it strange that something so significant as becoming a new creation, crossing over from death to life, and going from condemned to forgiven could occur without any tangible expression of it. I was told that the angels were rejoicing, but it wasn’t tangible. There was no sign or symbol or anything outward, and I found myself wishing there was.

After high school, I went to Miami University, knowing that I needed to find a faith community. I landed in Campus Crusade for Christ, known today as Cru, and its athletic ministry, Athletics

in Action, because I ran track and cross country. God provided friends and mentors during those years. I learned how to study the Bible and how to apply it better to my life. There were many “mountaintop experiences” through Cru’s ministry. My faith was strengthened through Bible studies, personal discipleship, retreats, conferences, and Spring Break trips.

While at Miami, I took a History of Architecture class. We examined and learned about structures from primitive times to the modern day in this class. I was surprised by how many churches were included. It was the first time I was exposed to the idea that a space can be used to draw people to God and that our physical surroundings can aid our faith. I didn’t realize it at the time, but now I recognize that these were Catholic churches using architecture as a way to express invisible realities. The class left a lasting impression on me.

Up to this point, the only Catholics I knew were ex-Catholics who had left the Church to become Protestant, or Catholics who were not practicing their faith. What I knew of Catholicism was what I had been taught by Protestants. These ideas included that Catholics relied on the traditions of men rather than God’s word, that they added books to the Bible, and that they had to work for their salvation.

After graduating from Miami and then Physical Therapy school, I began attending an Evangelical church in the Dayton area that had an active young adult ministry. I met Steve at this church, and we began dating. When I met him, Steve was a divorced dad with a six year old son. We dated for a year, then got married. I worked full time as a physical therapist until we welcomed a son in 2005, then another son in 2006.

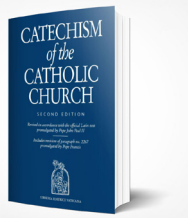
When I was pregnant with our first son, I knew in my depths that motherhood was God’s call on my life. The primitive prayer for my son that I prayed for many years was that God would be “real” to him. I wanted God to be part of my boys’ everyday life and tangible to them, not distant and detached. I realize now that as I prayed that for my sons, this was also a prayer for myself. When I discovered “O taste and see that the Lord is good” (Psalm

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

CATECHISM OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH

This second edition of the Catechism of the Catholic Church has been revised in accordance with the official Latin text promulgated by Pope John Paul II in 1997. It also has been enhanced by the addition of more than 100 pages.

#2533 • \$29.95



READ THE BIBLE AND CATECHISM IN A YEAR

By making a commitment of only twenty to thirty minutes a day, you can prayerfully read through the entire Bible and/or Catechism in one year! This handy guide is simply one of the best ways to challenge yourself to a deeper knowledge of Christ in the Scriptures and in His Church.

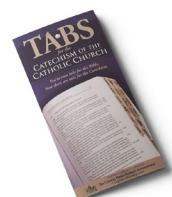
#5003 • \$3.00 (bulk rates available)



TABS FOR THE CATECHISM

You’ve seen tabs for the Bible; now there are tabs for the Catechism! These handy tabs give quick and easy reference to the teachings of the Church on 25 topics and include a subject index.

#5001 • \$5.00



34:8), this became my prayer for my sons. It perfectly expressed what I meant for God to be “real” to them. Little did I know how much this verse would come to mean to me, too.

An Unwelcome Development

Around 2013, it felt like the ground shifted beneath me. By that, I mean that the things that had brought me joy and fulfillment, such as studying the Bible, serving in church, and learning about God, became flat and stagnant. I was unmotivated to do anything religious. I couldn't even make myself do those things.

This was deeply disturbing for me. From out of nowhere, I felt like I was losing my faith. What was once so effortless now felt impossible. I questioned myself constantly: Did I not believe in God anymore? Why was everything so flat, so dark? Why did I feel dead inside? Was this a denominational difference? Was I not evangelical any more? What had I done wrong? What was wrong with me? Why was I in a relationship with a God who felt so absent to me? What was the point of it? What was supposed to sustain faith? As I read back through my journal from this time, I am struck by my uncertainty about my standing with God. As a Protestant, there was no means of objective certainty in your standing with God, only your own faith and belief in your standing.

Because this was so foreign, and being a rather reserved person, I did not share with anyone what I was going through. I didn't know anyone who had gone through such an experience, and I was embarrassed that it was happening to me. Furthermore, I knew what the response would be if I shared my experience at my church. I had sat under the teaching of my pastor long enough to know that I would be told this experience was essentially my fault. I expected to be told that I hadn't studied enough, hadn't prayed enough, hadn't served enough, hadn't given enough, or hadn't been in fellowship enough. I know that I'm imperfect, but I had not willfully gone looking for things other than God. I couldn't bear to be told to try harder. So while everything on the outside of my life looked good, I felt like I was withering and dying on the inside. That combination was unsustainable. I needed the outside and inside of me to match up, and I needed to not have to care about what anyone thought of me.

A New Direction

I had read about the practice of spiritual direction, which initially sounded offensive to me. Why would I let another person direct me in my relationship with God? Wasn't the Holy Spirit supposed to do that? I was extremely uncertain if this practice was considered acceptable, or if it would expose me to false teachings. But I was so desperate that I searched through the Evangelical Spiritual Director's website and reached out to one in another state. She agreed to meet with me over Skype. We began meeting in 2015, and I wept through the first several sessions as I recounted my faith history and spiritual difficulties. In spiritual direction, I drank from a deep well of grace. The director taught me about the ideas of consolation and desolation, that my desire for connection with God was from Him, that I hadn't done anything wrong, and that my desire for God pleased Him. She introduced me to other

spiritual disciplines like *lectio divina*, *visio divina*, silent prayer, the daily examen, and fixed hour prayer (Liturgy of the Hours). God worked through these practices. I was experiencing Him in more ways than just through studying the Bible and in the type of prayer where I did all the talking.

I wondered why I had never heard about Spiritual Disciplines before. A pastor from my church had told me that, in the Reformation, when it came to these spiritual practices, the Protestants “threw the baby out with the bath water.” I didn't really know what he meant because I had not studied Church history. But the more I learned about these practices, the more I recognized that they had origins in the Catholic Church — but of course, becoming Catholic had not crossed my mind.

As my faith was slowly recovering and evolving with spiritual direction, I was still having a hard time going to church, because it seemed to me that the Evangelical message was that you should believe in God because He will make your life better and you will be happy. On some level that may be true, but the Christian life seemed to be about a lot more than that when I considered the life of Jesus. Our family had gone to the same church for 19 years, and I thought maybe it was time to move on. During “worship,” I watched semi-professional musicians sing and play instruments on a black stage with screens and lights, where anything from a concert to a lecture to a theatrical production could be performed. I then received information from the sermon to apply to my life so that I could improve it.

While I know that God can be present in any environment, I longed for a space that encouraged a sacred sense. I wanted a space that drew my senses to God and aided a holy encounter. I began to look for another church and attended several different denominations. While some things were different, there was a core similarity to them that told me that, eventually, I would be feeling the same way there as I did at my current church. So I resigned myself to feeling stuck. It was becoming so difficult to worship in this environment, I started watching the online service at home on our couch, because I couldn't bring myself to go in person.

In the summer of 2019, I read an article related to a current event by Leah Libresco Sargent. Her short bio caught my attention when it said she recently converted to Catholicism. I thought, “Why would you do that?” I watched a video of her speaking about her conversion on YouTube, and it struck me that she appeared to only consider Catholicism. No Protestant denomination was proposed as an option. I knew vaguely that the Catholic Church believed itself to be the Church that Jesus founded. I also knew that there was a book called the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. Wanting to understand why Catholics believed this, I began to read it.

I was astounded with the reverence for Christ I found in the Catechism, and how Christ-centered it was. From there, I started reading about Church history and the writings of the early Church Fathers. I discovered that the history I was presented with as a Protestant was incomplete and inaccurate. I found writings, which, while not inspired like Scripture, were by faithful men who left a record of the Church's practices and beliefs, concerning such things as Baptism and the Eucharist. These were the beliefs and



A Note from JonMarc



Dear Friends of the CHNetwork,

At the beginning of December, we enter into Advent, the first season of the liturgical year of the Catholic Church, a time of anticipation and preparation for Christmas.

I have always loved the season of Advent for the natural way it harmonizes our liturgical focus with our *bodily* experiences of the transition from autumn to winter. As the days become colder and the nights darker and longer, the secular world around us rushes to turn up the thermostat, light the lights, and start the celebration early! In contrast, we are invited by the Church during Advent to embrace the season, to sit with the darkness, the cold, and the waiting—to take the time to ready ourselves to receive Christ anew on Christmas day.

For me, the season of Advent—both in its unique character as well as in what it anticipates—has always held a special connection to the Coming Home Network’s mission of helping Protestant pastors and laypeople (and others!) on the journey home to the Catholic Church. What is this connection? It has to do with the way in which Advent calls us to look forward not just to the coming of Christ but also to the *way* in which he chooses to come to us: *in the flesh*.

It is easy as Christians, accustomed as we are to the good news of the Gospel, to grow numb to the scandal of the Incarnation! *God became a man? He was born? He ate, drank, worked with his hands, got dirty, and had to take a bath?* Indeed. During Advent, we are invited in a certain sense to make a spiritual pilgrimage back to the point in salvation history *before* the incarnation had yet occurred. We reconnect during this time with our heritage as a people who long sojourned in darkness and awaited God’s promised Messiah—and who at long-last encountered the profound event that we now confess in the Nicene Creed:

For us men and for our salvation he came down from heaven, and by the Holy Spirit was incarnate of the Virgin Mary, and became man.

God not only gave us his Son, but he gave us his Son *in the flesh*. God made himself present to his people in a new and astonishing way.

Of course, there is more. As Christians, we know that Advent not only looks ahead to this “Christmas presence,” but also to its fulfillment on Good Friday and Easter Sunday. At the last supper, Christ stated, **“This is my body which will be given up for you,”** not only instituting the Sacrament of the Holy Eucharist as a perpetual gift of His bodily presence, but indeed summing up in this statement the profound answer to the riddle that is the incarnation. Jesus took on flesh—a human body—not only to

make himself a sacrificial gift to His people, but also to reveal to them the original meaning and purpose of their own bodies: to *become gifts as well*.

In his teaching, but above all in his example, Christ revealed to his people that from the beginning, the human body was created to make visible God’s love and to be our means for communicating this love to others. As the Catechism states, quoting from the text of a preface to the Christmas liturgy:

“In the body of Jesus we see our God made visible and so are caught up in love of the God we cannot see.”
(CCC 477)

The Word became flesh to communicate His love to his people and to teach them how to love one another. We are to be the body of Christ—his hands, feet, and lips, communicating his awesome love to the world.

All of this brings me back to the connection between Advent and our work at the Coming Home Network. Most of the people we work with are already Christians. They know God, they have come to believe in his son Jesus, and they are striving to follow Him according to the light they have been given. They contact the CHNetwork because the Holy Spirit has opened their hearts to the reality that God has MORE he wants to give them. That “more” certainly includes the fullness of doctrinal truth guarded and guided by the Holy Spirit, the saints, the Church’s heritage of prayers and devotions, etc. But the source and summit of all of these is Our Lord’s gift of Himself—of His own body and blood—in the Holy Eucharist. It is through this great and preeminent sacrament that we receive Christ’s incarnate love and are brought into communion as the Body of Christ, the Church.

Advent is thus a time during which we stand in unique solidarity with our Protestant brothers and sisters who are on the journey to the Catholic Church and to the Holy Eucharist. All of us can take this time to step back in profound awe and wonder at the humility of our God; at his body freely given up out of love for us; at the sacraments that communicate this great love; and at the gift of our own bodies, which make this love visible and communicable to the world. May we imitate the incarnate Christ in becoming a gift to others this Advent and Christmas season.

As always, thank you for reading this newsletter, for your prayers, support, and participation in this apostolate of reunion. May you and your family have a fruitful Advent followed by a blessed and joyous Christmas!

In Christ,



JonMarc Grodi, Executive Director

ADVENT TRADITIONS

Close to Home

Prior to our conversion to the Catholic faith, most of us did not celebrate Advent as a season the way we do now, if at all. We asked our staff at The Coming Home Network to share their favorite traditions to celebrate the season of Advent since becoming Catholic. Here's what some of them shared:

Throughout the season of Advent, before family dinner, we have the kids turn off all the lights and we light the candles of the Advent wreath while singing *O Come, O Come, Emanuel*. We then conclude with the usual meal prayer and begin our meal. We love using this particular Advent Hymn (which has a waiting, anticipatory, and dark feel to it) and the contrasts of physical light and darkness to help our kids get into the spirit of the season through their senses as well as their intellects.
– **JonMarc Grodi**, Executive Director

Growing up Hindu, I knew nothing about Advent. Our family did adopt “secular” Christmas customs, like having a Christmas tree and Santa bringing gifts, though. Now raising a family as a Catholic, I (along with my husband) am trying to intentionally create traditions that pass on the wonder and anticipation of the Advent season. We have taken the tree trimming of my childhood and transformed it into an Advent calendar of sorts. At the beginning of Advent, I put up hollow ornaments that contain candy and a Scripture verse. Then, each night, we turn down the lights, light the Advent candles, sing the refrain of *O Come, O Come Emmanuel*, and open one ornament to enjoy the sweetness both in chocolate and in the Word. While our faithfulness to the nightly practice sometimes wavers, I hope my children will remember the overall joy and wonder as they grow in their own relationship with Christ and His Church in the years to come.
– **Rakhi McCormick**, Communications Coordinator

One of our favorite and most sacred Advent traditions since becoming Catholic wasn't something we ever thought about before coming home to the Church. Each year, along with thousands of fellow Catholics in our area, we attend one of several reconciliation services in which priests from each of the local parish Churches offer the Sacrament of Reconciliation together at a different Church each night in the days preceding Christmas. This important element in our celebration connects to the message of John the Baptist in his preparation of God's people for the inauguration of the ministry of Jesus—“Prepare ye the way of the Lord. Make straight paths for him!” (Luke 3:4).
– **Kenny Burchard**, Director of Development

I have enjoyed so many new experiences since coming home to the Church in 2006. A liturgical calendar was so foreign to me, but I have to say it's one of my favorite “new things.” I look forward to Advent so much every year. I love the slowing down, the preparation—not the hustle and bustle preparation of shopping and entertaining, but the preparation of our hearts to welcome our King. A few years ago when my two grandchildren were old enough to read, I bought them each a Jesse Tree set. We don't all live close enough to do this in person so we decided we would do this virtually as often as we could. We each have the same Jesse Tree set. Our intention is always to Facetime each other, taking turns with the readings and hanging our ornaments together. I will admit we have not always been as faithful to this as I had hoped, but the memories we have made and hope to continue to make will be with us forever. And someday they may be hanging these very ornaments with their own grandchildren to prepare their little hearts to welcome their King on Christmas day.
– **Melissa Slagle**, Pastoral Care Coordinator



Joyful Journey Updates

From Jonathan, a former Churches of Christ minister

It is hard to believe that only a little over a year ago I was on a Zoom meeting with you as a scared Protestant minister who thought Catholicism made a whole lot of sense. Now, I'm a Catholic in communion with the Church. I was received [into the Church] on August 6, and am working at a job I love. God has been good to me. I just wanted to shoot you an update. Thank you for always being there for me "On the Journey". ■

From Don, currently on the journey

My wife and I are currently going through OCIA and really enjoying the journey. I find it amazing that while this process, meaning exploring and discovering the Catholic Church, has been a lifetime in the making, I am finding myself loving Christ more and more daily, falling in love with the Catholic Church more and more as I discover more and more and by extension learning to love our Blessed Mother more and more. God bless. ■

From Mike, a former Baptist minister

I was diagnosed with cancer about a year ago. Since then I have had chemotherapy and then radiation, which is now complete. It has been quite an adventure. Through it all, the Lord continually blessed me with His comfort and provided our Mother's love and encouragement. My Catholic friends encouraged and prayed for me and my wife. Two local deacons (Al & Jerry) from St. Mark's provided us with the Bread of Life each Sunday, without fail, while we were isolated. Father Francisco, from Our Lady of Lourdes, anointed me and prayed daily for my healing. I have been so blessed to have had the privilege and joy of Catholicism during this trial!

I could not have made it without the joy of our faith! Thank you and all the others that have lifted me up and strengthened my wife during these months (PS—Should anyone be hesitant to make the "journey" send them to me!). ■

Do you have an update on your journey to share with us? Send it to info@chnetwork.org.



WHEN THE CHURCH celebrates the liturgy of Advent each year, she makes present this ancient expectancy of the Messiah, for by sharing in the long preparation for the Savior's first coming, the faithful renew their ardent desire for his second coming. By celebrating the precursor's birth and martyrdom, the Church unites herself to his desire: "He must increase, but I must decrease."

Catechism of the Catholic Church, 524

EWTN'S THE JOURNEY HOME on television & radio, hosted by JonMarc Grodi, CHNetwork Executive Director



TELEVISION

Mon. 8PM ET—Encores: Tues. 1AM ET, Thurs. 2PM ET
The Best of The Journey Home: Sat. 6PM ET

RADIO

Mon. 8PM ET—Encores: Sat. 7 AM ET, Sun. 1 AM ET and 5 PM ET
The Best of The Journey Home: Mon.–Fri. 1 AM ET

Monday, Dec. 4

Matt Gerald

Former Methodist Protestant

Monday, Dec. 11

Deb Scaravilli

Former Evangelical Protestant

Monday, Dec. 18

Dustin Quick

Former Muslim & Calvinist

Monday, Dec. 25

Curt & Judy Ashburn

Former Mennonites

Original Air Date 01/27/20

Monday, Jan. 1

Allison Dreher

Former Baptist

Original Air Date 2/3/20

Schedule is subject to change.

To access the full archive of past *Journey Home* programs go to chnetwork.org/journey-home



Advent Gifts Guide the Way Home

As 2023 draws to a close, I am struck by a “saving theme” in the story of Scripture that powerfully resonates with the mission of the Coming Home Network: *Advent is the gift that guides the way home.* In this wonderful season of Advent, we celebrate God’s own gift of His Son, Jesus—“the way, the truth, and the life” (John 14:6)—who comes

not only to guide us on the way but to *be* the way in which humanity comes home to Father God!

This idea of “gifts that guide the way home” is the very thing our donors tell us motivates their generosity, support, and partnership. When we ask them why they give, they tell us:

- You are helping non-Catholic clergy come home.
- You are helping me learn more about and share my own Catholic faith.
- You are giving me hope that my fallen-away loved ones can return to the Church.

Of course, my constant and immediate response to all of it is, “*WE! We are doing that together!*”

Without our partners in mission and their “gifts that guide the way home,” there would be no Coming Home Network to help so many of us on our journeys! This year we have seen over 20 non-Catholic clergy come into the Church and are presently helping more than 80 others at various stages along the road. This is in addition to the hundreds

of non-clergy inquirers who contact us every year seeking guidance.

Would you join me in this season of Advent by prayerfully and generously sharing a year-end gift? Your partnership with us in this mission will light the way for people who continue in ever-growing numbers to make the journey home to the Catholic Church. ■

Kenny Burchard (Director of Development at CHNetwork) is a former Pentecostal pastor who, along with his wife MaryJo and their son Victor, came home to the Church in 2019. They have been donors to the Coming Home Network since July 2018, and monthly donors to COMPASS since September 2020.

YEAR END GIVING

A Gift to GUIDE THEM HOME



Please remember the Coming Home Network as an integral part of your year-end giving plans. Join our mission to help men and women, clergy and laity, from every background imaginable, find their way home to the Catholic Church.

Take the Next Step this Season

Use the enclosed envelope to make your year-end gift, or give through our secure donor portal at chnetwork.org/donate.

You may also make your gift over the phone by calling (740) 450-1175.



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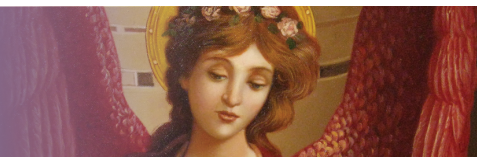
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The Coming Home Network International

CHNetwork was founded to help men and women, clergy and laity, from every background imaginable, discover the truth and beauty of the Catholic Church.

Prayer List



Clergy

■ **For Mark, a Church of Christ pastor** who has finally made the decision to begin looking earnestly for a new job so that he can resign his ministry.

■ **For Kelvin, a former Baptist minister** who is reading widely in Catholic theology and apologetics and seeking answers to his remaining questions.

■ **For Michael, a former Hindu** and current director of a Baptist ministry to the homeless who wants to become Catholic but knows he will certainly lose his job if he does.

■ **For Thomas, a former Episcopal priest** recently welcomed into full communion with the Catholic Church and discerning his future as a Catholic.

■ **For Glen, a Methodist pastor** deeply troubled by what he sees happening in his denomination, finding himself drawn to explore the Catholic Church but fearful of all that this would mean for his family, sense of calling, and employment.

■ **For David, a Protestant academic** who has decided to leave his teaching position to enter the Catholic Church and is concerned about how he will make a living.

■ **For Leonard, the pastor of an independent Protestant Church** who over many years has come to the truth and beauty of the Catholic Church and is asking the Lord to help him discern his future.

■ **For Michael, a Protestant seminarian** who began reading the Early Church Fathers, left the seminary and is entering the Catholic Church.

■ **For Michael, an Anglican priest** who very much wants to become a Catholic priest of the Ordinariate of the Chair of St. Peter, that the Lord will make the way clear for this.

■ **For Phillip, a former Protestant minister** who made the decision to enter the Catholic Church this past Easter Vigil, that the Holy Spirit will guide and inspire his family to follow the path he has taken.

■ **For Phil, an Evangelical missionary** working in a foreign country who finds himself drawn back to the Catholic Church in which he was baptized and raised and is concerned that the mission would suffer if he and his wife were to leave it.

■ **For Jeremiah, an Evangelical pastor** struggling deeply with how he would make a living and support his family if he were to leave his current position to become Catholic.

■ **For James, a Baptist pastor** who resigned his ministry and moved his family to a new city for a new job, that the Lord will bless him as he attempts to enter the Catholic Church and lead his family into the Church as well.

Layity

■ **For Angel, who is on the journey,** that the Lord would bestow his blessings upon a new marriage and provide continued guidance as she makes her way home to the Church.

■ **For Serena, a non-denominational Christian,** that she would find continued guidance as she seeks the Lord and discerns whether she should attend OCIA as part of her journey.

■ **For Sierra, a non-denominational Christian,** for her continued journey home to the Church and for marital unity in the faith.

■ **For Angela, a non-denominational Christian,** that she receives guidance as she returns to the Church and that her husband also returns to the Church.

■ **For Anita, a Pentecostal,** that she would be granted strength and discernment, as well as marital unity in her faith journey.

■ **For Angela, a Baptist,** that she and her husband would be led to the truth.

■ **For Nina, a Mormon,** that she would find a supportive community within the Church.

■ **For David, a Presbyterian,** that the Church's fullness of the teaching of Jesus would draw him home to the Catholic faith.

■ **For John, a Pentecostal in Oregon,** that as he continues to read the works of Pope Benedict XVI, he would develop a hunger for Jesus in the Holy Eucharist.

■ **For Keller, an Anglican,** that as he works his way through the Catechism, the Holy Spirit would draw him to the Altar of our Lord Jesus in the Catholic Church.

■ **For Ryan, a Lutheran in Illinois,** that all barriers and obstacles he may encounter on his journey to the Church would be cleared away through the grace of our Lord Jesus.

■ **For Graham, an Anglican in the United Kingdom,** that as he prays the Rosary with the Blessed Virgin, Jesus' Mother would guide him in the love of Jesus.

■ **For Nathan, a member of the Christian & Missionary alliance in Colorado,** that our Lord Jesus would heal all the sufferings of his past and guide him back Home to the Catholic Church.

■ **For Brian, a Lutheran in Texas,** that the Holy Spirit would guide his reading during his OCIA journey and bring him rejoicing to the Easter sacraments.

■ **For Kelle, an Independent Baptist in Tennessee,** that he and his wife may journey together to full-communication with the Catholic Church.

■ **For Austin, a Pentecostal Holiness brother in Virginia,** that all of the spiritual bondage from his past may be broken and that he finds good mentors to guide him to the fullness of the faith in the Catholic Church.

Navigating Times of Spiritual Darkness

by Matt Swaim, Director of Outreach

For some of us who come from Evangelical Christian backgrounds, there can be a degree of confusion about what it should *feel* like to have a relationship with God. Some styles of worship and theological movements place such an emphasis on finding comfort and joy in following Christ, that those feelings can end up becoming a barometer of one's Christian faith.

In those situations, a fluctuation in feelings can feel like a *crisis* of faith. And when the pressure in one's Christian community is to constantly give the appearance of living in victory and joy, that struggle is often a hidden one. Who in that environment would want to admit to a fellow believer that they're struggling in their faith, or going through a period where they're having trouble feeling the presence of God?

Fortunately, in Catholic spirituality, there are many great saints who have not only gone through these spiritual peaks and valleys themselves, but have also shared incredibly helpful thoughts on how to navigate them. One such saint is Ignatius of Loyola, who came up with 14 "rules" to help discern the voice of God in our lives. St. Ignatius refers to *spiritual consolation* as a feeling of joy and the presence of God in the soul, "quieting it and giving it peace in its Creator and Lord." In contrast, he offers several excellent recommendations for when we encounter *spiritual desolation*, which he connects with words like "tepid" and "unquiet," and even a feeling of darkness and separation.

For those struggling with desolation in the spiritual life, here are a few key pieces of advice from St. Ignatius:

DON'T CHANGE YOUR SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES IN TIMES OF DESOLATION.

St. Ignatius says to "be firm and constant" in our spiritual resolutions during times of desolation, because we often made those resolutions during a time of clarity and consolation. Chasing spiritual novelty in order to keep up an emotional high puts the focus back on the self, rather than on God. Some of us have gone through the "church shopping" experience, bouncing from place to place seeking an emotionally satisfying worship experience, and it puts a tremendous amount of pressure on both the believer and the congregation they're attending to "perform" in a satisfactory way, Sunday after Sunday. The Catholic liturgical life is

meant to be an antidote to the impossible burden of having to come up with the perfect way to pray on our own. Keep praying, keep reading Scripture, and stay as close as you can to the sacramental life.

SPIRITUAL DESOLATION ISN'T NECESSARILY YOUR FAULT.

St. Ignatius gives three main reasons why desolation can occur, and only one of them is related to our own negligence or sin. A second reason he points out is that God may be removing our sense of him in order to strengthen and mature our faith, so that it is not based solely on emotional payoff, but also on loyalty and self-sacrificial love. This leads to a third reason why a believer might be experiencing spiritual desolation:

GOD MAY BE TRYING TO TEACH YOU GREATER RELIANCE ON HIM.

According to St. Ignatius, sometimes these "low points" in the spiritual life are allowed by God because perhaps He is teaching us that consolation is not something we can manufacture through good works or the perfect devotional routine, but rather a gift of grace that comes from him alone. St. Paul reflects on this very point in his second letter to the Corinthians, when he recalls his experience of a persistent "thorn in the flesh":

"Three times I besought the Lord about this, that it should leave me; but he said to me, *My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.* I will all the more gladly boast of my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities; for when I am weak, then I am strong." (1 Cor 12:8-10)

Fortunately, in the Catholic world of liturgy and sacraments, we are able to rest on a promise of God's presence that is not reliant upon our continually changing moods and feelings. We know that by virtue of the promise of Christ Himself, He is truly present in the Eucharist, regardless of where we are on the continuum of consolation and desolation. The grace we receive in the sacraments is not dependent upon our ability to feel it.

There are times when the journey is full of joy and peace, and times when the road is difficult and tumultuous. But we trust that the Lord who has begun a good work in us will be with us all the way, even when He is not present to our senses. ■

Live in faith
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Cast your
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~ St. John of
the Cross

Feast Day:
December 14

practices of Christians from the beginning, not distortions that sprang up hundreds of years later. As I read, I became convinced that the Catholic Church was the Church that Jesus founded.

Prior to reading about Catholicism, I was not aware of the Real Presence of Jesus in the Eucharist. Ultimately, this is what solidified my desire to become Catholic. Through this sacrament, the invitation to commune with God in objective certainty was offered to me. This was the tangible way to experience Jesus and participate with more than just my head and emotions. How had I not taken Jesus at his word when He said, “For my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me” (John 6:55–57)? This was the fulfillment of “O taste and see that the Lord is good” (Psalm 34:8), which I had so desperately longed to experience.

Despite this deep attraction, there were some issues that I needed to understand better. The first was Catholic teaching on justification. As a Protestant, I was taught that a person is saved by grace alone through faith alone in a moment, when you acknowledge your sinfulness and ask Jesus to come into your heart to be your savior. This moment was like flipping a switch. It provided instant justification before God and a declaration of righteousness, but not actual righteousness. The words “salvation” and “justification” were also used in the Catechism of the Catholic Church, but it was evident that they were being used in a different sense. Rather than a singular moment in which justification and salvation were completed, a progressive process in which we are made righteous in a lifelong transformation was described. Stephen Wood’s *Grace and Justification: An Evangelical’s Guide to Catholic Beliefs* (Family Life Center Publications, 2017) helped me to understand how Catholics see the relationship of grace, justification, and sanctification. Acknowledging that initial justification is by grace, justification actually makes us inwardly righteous. Catholics view sanctification as part of the process of justification and not a distinct period after justification. I began to internalize a salvation that was not just “going to heaven when you die to spend eternity with God,” but one of a moral transformation as I cooperated with God to make me fit for heaven.

Additionally, I wanted to understand the role of Sacred Tradition. As a Protestant, the Bible was my sole rule of faith. I accepted this “truth” as self-evident. Was the Tradition of the Catholic Church man-made and an accretion to the simple gospel that Jesus preached, as I had been taught? Christian Smith’s book *How To Go From Being a Good Evangelical to a Committed Catholic in Ninety-Five Difficult Steps* (Cascade Books, 2011) challenged me to consider Tradition in a new way. These ideas from the book included that Jesus did not write books or manuscripts and that Scripture does not say that Jesus

instructed his disciples to write down his teachings. “And Jesus came and said to them, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age’” (Matthew 28:18–20). Smith points out that

Jesus seemed content to convey his message orally. “For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you” (St. Paul in 1 Corinthians 11:23) and “I would rather not use paper and ink; instead I hope to come to you and talk with you face to face” (2 John 12). St. Paul and St. John reveal that they were teaching people, in person, what they had learned from the Lord. Smith notes that the early Church grew and functioned effectively through relying on authoritative, apostolic oral Tradition. As I considered the information from the book, that there was no

way to mass produce the Bible until the 1500s and that most people were illiterate, Tradition began to seem plausible, given the rapid spread of Christianity in those times. Not to mention, how did I even know which ancient writings were Scripture? How did I know that 1 Thessalonians was inspired but the First Epistle of Clement was not? I realized that I was already relying on Catholic Tradition whenever I quoted Scripture, because it was the Catholic Church which defined the canon of the Bible through Church councils.

When I became curious and asked a question of the Catholic Church about her beliefs on an issue, such as the Marian dogmas or praying to the Saints, she had an answer for me in her documents and great minds throughout the centuries. Soon, I saw that history, reason, and theology sided with the Catholic Church’s position.

However, even though the Catholic faith was good in theory and on paper, as a practical matter, I did not know a single Catholic devoted to his faith. I prayed that God would bring a faith-filled Catholic across my path. That fall, Megan, a speech therapist, began working at the same school where I worked. When I learned that she was getting married, I looked up her wedding website and read the story of how she met her fiancé. They had met at something called Eucharistic Adoration. I didn’t know what that was, but it sounded very Catholic. I could tell that she and her fiancé were very devout. Soon afterwards, I was able to speak with Megan privately. I shared that I thought God was leading me to the Catholic Church and asked if I could talk to her more about it. She agreed. We spent lunches during the next two school years discussing questions about Catholicism—everything from what a feast day is (and that there’s no actual food formally involved) to different Religious Orders. Megan listened and offered her perspective. I was able to catch a glimpse of what practicing the Catholic faith was like. I was so thankful



[The Eucharist] was the tangible way to experience Jesus and participate with more than just my head and emotions.

that God had brought a Catholic who loved her faith into my life. Megan will always be a reminder of God's faithfulness to me.

Coming Home

At this point, I knew I wanted to be Catholic, but it wasn't a straightforward path into the Church. My husband, Steve, had observed my faith struggle over the years and supported me in my exploration, but he did not have the same convictions. I was prepared to continue to go to the Evangelical church with Steve in addition to attending Mass on the weekends. Over time, as I shared what I was learning, Steve began to warm up to the Catholic faith and began attending Mass with me. When it came time for RCIA to begin, he agreed to go so that he could learn more and decide for himself. Ultimately, Steve decided that he also wanted to become Catholic. This was one of the most

meaningful gifts he has given to me. I will forever be thankful to God for working in Steve in this way. Shifting a faith paradigm is difficult and unexpected in a marriage. I realize that it does not work out this way for all couples and am deeply appreciative of where we are now.

The last issue to be resolved was the matter of Steve's divorce. For us to become Catholic, he needed a Decree of Nullity for his first "marriage." He completed the paperwork, and we began RCIA in the fall of 2020.

Waiting for the Tribunal's decision was difficult. Despite the anxiety of this time period, I appreciated the Church's willingness to determine the validity of her members' marriages. I had lost a Protestant friend at the time of our marriage 20 years earlier, because I was marrying a divorced person. I had been told by other Protestants that my husband should not have married again and instead continued to try to reconcile the previous relationship. I had also been denied leadership positions in Christian groups because I was married to a divorced person. Around that time, I read the guidelines regarding remarriage according to our Evangelical church. It seemed that our circumstances did not fall under their conditions for remarriage. The question came to mind: Why had our Protestant pastor married us when we didn't meet these conditions? I sent an email to ask him and shared my concerns, but received no response. I did not pursue it further because, in some ways, I was afraid to know the answer. Because of these incidents over the years, I had lived with uncertainty about my marriage's acceptance before God, despite the fact that we loved and were committed to one another and our family.

With this lingering uncertainty in the background of my mind over the years, there was relief in knowing that the Tribunal would look into the facts and conditions of Steve's first relationship to determine if a valid marriage had occurred. The Easter Vigil came and went, while we watched the rest of our RCIA class enter the Church and we waited for a decision. In May of 2021, we received the letter from the Tribunal declaring Steve's first marriage null, and we were free to enter the Church. We convalidated our marriage and were confirmed at a Wedding Mass held just for us, which happily coincided around the time of our 20th Wedding Anniversary. I was finally home.

As I write this, it has been almost two years that I have been Catholic. I continue to learn more about Catholic teaching and partake regularly in the sacraments. I never want to leave the Church where Jesus is present to me in a substantial way. And if, by God's will, I would go through another period of desolation, I now have a rich history of saints who have gone before me and experienced the same thing. They are a source of inspiration and consolation to draw upon, and they will pray for me! The Lord has provided everything we need in His Church to truly taste and see that He is good. ■

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God; all things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made. In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

John 1: 1-5

Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, "I am the light of the world; he who follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."

John 8:12

Gina Gentile is a wife and mom living in Dayton, OH. She offers her story with thanksgiving to God and in hope of encouragement to the reader.

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