



March 2024 CHNewsletter

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THE COMING HOME NETWORK INTERNATIONAL

Journeys Home

Chesterton, COVID, and the Catholic Church

By Lee Sondeno

After playing guitar in front of a crowd of nearly 10,000 people during an Evangelical missions crusade in March of 2019 at the Palacio de los Deportes in the heart of Mexico City, it’s unfathomable that, almost exactly one year later, in March of 2020, a global pandemic and its resulting shutdown orders would act as the catalyst that would eventually lead my family and me to the fullness of the Christian faith in the Catholic Church.



You might consider us “COVID converts.” Looking back on all that led to us leaving our deep-rooted Pentecostal heritage for something we knew absolutely nothing about can only be described as a gift—an outpouring of grace during one of the most troubling and isolating years most of us will ever experience.

During the pandemic, people were scared and living in hopelessness; yet God was at work within our lives. In the middle of the chaos, we would decide to leave the familiarity of our religious heritages, our families, and our friends for the truth we had found in the Catholic Church. It all started with a corpulent early 20th century author from England and a wonderful

literary society that wasn’t afraid to shine a light in the darkest of times.

Born Under the Pew

My wife Valiree and I were both “born under the pew” in the Assemblies of God, a charismatic Pentecostal denomination, in which our families have extremely deep roots. We both have aunts, uncles, cousins, and in-laws who are pastors and missionaries; grandparents and great-grandparents who were preachers and missionaries—with my great-grandfather being one of the first Pentecostal evangelists in Norway. Other family members serve as teachers, musicians and worship ministers, church board members and dedicated lay people. I even ended up marrying a pastor’s daughter! In other words, our families are deeply Christian and very Pentecostal.

Growing up, there were many things my family and the Assemblies of God taught me

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...Journeys Home Continued...

were important to the life of a Pentecostal Evangelical, always backed up by Scripture: the importance of Baptism (of the Holy Spirit and of water), worship, Scripture, prayer, being a part of a church community, serving in the church, and holy communion (though it was viewed as entirely symbolic). Our childhoods were profoundly Christ-centered *and* ministry-centered, and our relationship with Jesus and dedication to church shaped absolutely everything we did. I thank God often for the blessing of growing up in such a religious, Bible-based, and Spirit-filled heritage.

It was never a matter of *if* you would use your spiritual talents and gifts for the church and evangelization, but *how and where*. Being of a strongly musical family (many of whom could sing every song in the hymnal by heart), and like so many others my age who cut their teeth during the star-studded wonderment that was 90's Christian Contemporary Music, serving in worship ministry has always been a part of me. I loved it. I felt, and still feel, that God blessed me with that particular gift of service. To live out Psalm 95, playing guitar and singing at every opportunity, was my ministry and calling. Not only did it bring me closer to God through worship, but it also led me to my wife. Valiree and I met on the church stage (she plays piano), and we served together in Las Vegas, Nevada, as worship and youth leaders for many years as part of her father's pastorate in my childhood church.

Fragmented

A few years into our marriage, Valiree and I left her father's church in search of our own ministry opportunities. We spent time in many different churches and even other charismatic denominations outside of the Assemblies of God in worship ministry, serving in leadership roles across Las Vegas during our first 15 years of marriage. Being in a town that's obsessed with showmanship, we were part of a very hip, modern worship scene with rocking music and first-

class musicians. We would serve where we were needed, from youth ministries to conferences, new church plants, and Bible study groups. We were raised and wired to serve wherever and whenever we could.

Between 2006 and 2017, we served in seven different churches, all in the same city, all with different interpretations of how to "do church." The idea that something was wrong with this model started to penetrate me. I witnessed firsthand the type of division that seemed so deeply rooted in the Protestant culture: church splits and dissension over styles of music, styles of preaching, or even styles of management. If you didn't agree with something, you would simply leave for another church or start your own.

In 2018, we started attending a non-denominational church, refreshed by the verse-by-verse Bible preaching and the focus on the cross, salvation, and winning souls for Christ, which seemed a positive departure from what we had experienced previously. It certainly checked all the boxes for us, and we saw many opportunities for growth and use of our musical talents and leadership from spending all those years in worship ministry.

It didn't take long, though, for the same issues that plagued other churches in the Las Vegas valley to make their way there as well. Things modernized, got louder, bigger, and "better," like so many other "seeker friendly" churches. The cross, normally located behind us on stage, was eventually taken down and replaced with black painted walls and new lighting—an attempt at making sure the experience was flashy, but not too offensive to "seekers," as many Christian symbols can be.

Unsettled by this, 2018 brought about much prayer and personal study to help fill in some of the gaps. We took matters into our own hands, and my wife started homeschooling both our kids more intensively, with a purposeful Christ-centered focus. I remember, during

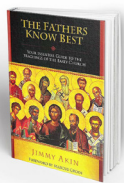
RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

THE FATHERS KNOW BEST

BY JIMMY AKIN

Jimmy Akin's introduction to the first Christians is designed to make it easy for you to find the information you want and need about the early Church. This book contains more than 900 quotations from the Fathers of the Church to help you understand historic Christianity.

#3144 - \$24.95



SIGNS OF LIFE

BY DR. SCOTT HAHN

Dr. Scott Hahn illuminates the roots and significance of all things Catholic, including: the *Sign of the Cross*, the Mass, the Sacraments, praying with the saints, guardian angels, sacred images and relics, the celebration of Christmas, and more.

#3247 - \$15.00



PERSONAL PRAYER: A GUIDE FOR RECEIVING THE FATHER'S LOVE

Rich with the wisdom of Scripture, Catholic teaching, and the writings of the saints, this book, written by two Benedictine monks, is an exhaustive guide for priests, religious, and laity desiring to receive the Father's love in a profoundly personal way.

#3258 - \$15.84



this time, having a distinct longing to study how historical Christianity would view some of these big questions we had about ministry, the church, and our roles in spreading and sharing the love of Jesus through the modern worship experience. What was Christianity even like before the electric guitar?

An Englishman In Las Vegas

Whenever these questions of Christian identity crept into my mind, I would revisit a core group of authors who always had a positive impact on me, from modern influences like John Eldridge and Francis Chan, to spiritual giants like C.S. Lewis, Francis Schaeffer, and my personal favorite, G.K. Chesterton. I discovered Chesterton when I was just starting out as a freshman majoring in English at the local university in Las Vegas, while flipping through an English 101 book and landing on a short poem called *The Donkey*. I started looking into who this Chesterton fellow was and discovered that C. S. Lewis was tremendously influenced by him. I was hooked, and I began searching for more Chesterton wherever I could find him. Whenever I felt numb to the modern church experience and needed intellectual reasoning behind my core beliefs as a Christian, I would visit Chesterton to see what he had to say about things. In fact, the first book I gifted my wife before we were even engaged was a copy of Chesterton's *Orthodoxy*. "Read this," I said, "it's the best book on Christianity I've ever read." God bless her, she did read it. It wasn't until much later that I would realize the role *Orthodoxy* played in our lives, or the blessing of having a wife so open to her husband's bouts of zealously sharing what he'd recently discovered about our Christian faith.

Being quite the proud and bookish English major, I followed the American Chesterton Society, regularly visiting the Society's website over the years. But it was during these challenging times at church I would fondly remember all those late nights I had spent in college, watching a show called *The Apostle of Common Sense* on a cable TV channel I'd randomly stumbled upon. It was during these years that I found myself longing for those expositions that Dale Ahlquist gave of Chesterton's common-sense Christianity. There had to be something more to the way we "did church." My curiosity about how Chesterton saw the world finally got the better of me, and I became a card-carrying member of the Society in March of 2019, receiving my first *Gilbert! Magazine* and starting to follow the group more intently on social media.

Setting The Stage

2019 was also significant for my ministerial career as a guitar player and worship leader. Not only did I have opportunities to play various conferences and concerts and help in recording original worship songs, but in March of 2019, I was able to travel with the worship team to Mexico City for a large outreach event featuring some big names in the Christian music industry. I was humbled by the opportunity to minister at such a large event and genuinely moved as thousands of people came down to the stage to

ask Jesus to be their Lord and Savior, while thousands of Bibles were passed out to new believers during the altar call. This was what we in worship ministry lived for—a chance to impact people through praise and worship music. Yet something gnawed at my heart as I watched the outreach service end and all those people made their way out of the stadium and back to their homes, never to be seen by us again. Was this all just a flash in the pan? Where will those people go to church tomorrow?

What Am I Protesting?

That same month, the Chesterton Society started posting a Chesterton Academy school trip to Rome on Instagram, asking for prayers to be prayed by all the students who were there in Rome visiting some of the most ancient and sacred places of our Christian faith. The thought of this was difficult for me to grasp. People I didn't even know, praying for me? No secret handshakes? No "if you're Catholic, we will pray"? No "us vs. them," but unity—real Christian unity—something I had never felt before in my hyper-localized, competitive turf-wars church reality. I remember responding with a simple request for prayer, and just knowing that members of the Society were praying halfway around the globe for me was unbearably humbling.

If being a charismatic Evangelical taught us anything, it's how *we* got it right, and how *lost* Catholics are, living in the shadows of empty cathedrals now serving as museums. Yet here was a very alive, very Catholic group of young people extending their hand in prayer and fellowship while meeting with other energetic, Christ-filled Catholics in Rome (how many of them *are* there?!), surrounded by unimaginably beautiful art and historic places. For the first time ever, I felt a real connection to those places as a Christian. Also for the first time, I asked myself, "If I am a Protestant, then what, exactly, am I protesting?" This was the same Jesus that we followed, right? As a Christian, isn't this part of my history? In those moments, Christendom became real and universal and big—but somehow closer than ever before, and suddenly, everywhere.

Throughout the rest of 2019, I surveyed the Catholic Church, but from a distance. I would research Catholic vs. Protestant, finding as many documentaries as I could about Church history or the Reformation and looking up Christian apologists I admired for their take on Catholicism. I searched with the hope of them possibly talking me off this dangerous ledge, this secret little hobby of mine of being a member of the Chesterton Society, which I now realized happened to be very Catholic—and me suddenly ready to *defend their being Catholic*. The gap between how we "did church" versus what I was discovering about how Catholics lived the faith continued to grow, and I started questioning more and more why we believed what we did as Protestants.

The Show Must Go On

Then, like a crash of frying pans, a global pandemic hit in March of 2020. Everything screeched to a halt, including our



A Note from JonMarc

Dear Friends of the CHNetwork,

Frequently in our walk with Jesus Christ, moments of great conversion come not from the discovery of something wholly novel, but rather by the rediscovery of something old, familiar, simple, and perhaps, as a result, easily taken for granted. As we continue our annual journey through this liturgical season of Lent—to the cross and the resurrection that lies beyond it—I wanted

to take a brief moment to reflect with you on the practice of the *Sign of the Cross*. It is a simple, sacramental prayer that the world rightly associates with the Catholic Church, but is one which Catholics would readily admit to often practicing mindlessly out of habit (*Mea culpa!*). Let us take a moment to consider this staple of Catholic prayer, especially for those who are new to it.

The Sign of the Cross

The *Sign of the Cross* has been practiced in various forms by Christians since the early life of the Church. The most common form typically involves tracing the form of the cross on one's body through a touch to the forehead, abdomen, left shoulder, and right, while reciting the trinitarian formula: "*In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*" While the *Sign of the Cross* is most frequently made before and after other prayers, it has also long been the practice of Christians to make the *Sign of the Cross* at a moment of need or to simply practice the presence of God in all circumstances. The Early Church Father, Tertullian, living and writing in the second century notes:

At every forward step and movement, at every going in and out, when we put on our clothes and shoes, when we bathe, when we sit at table, when we light the lamps, on seat, in all the ordinary actions of daily life, we trace upon the forehead the sign.

The *Sign of the Cross* is a unique form of what Catholics call a **sacramental**. While the **seven sacraments** are preeminent instances of God's working through the visible, material signs (water, oil, bread, etc.) to impart invisible graces, **sacramentals** are a much broader category encompassing all manner of things that may point to, and indeed occasion, the receiving of graces by the intentional and receptive Christian soul. Common sacramentals might include things like prayer books, holy images, wedding rings, or a crucifix pendant. Because these are brought consciously into our prayer and worship of God, the Church recognizes the minor sacramental character they adopt in imitation of the sacraments instituted by Christ. All of creation can be, in this sense, *sacramental*, because God desires to work and speak through it.

Like other gestures used in Catholic prayer and worship the *Sign of the Cross* is also *body language*. We communicate not only with our lips but with the rest of our bodies as well. When we cross ourselves or kneel before God, we are speaking with our bodies what we believe with our minds

and profess with our lips—not only to God but to ourselves as well! Engaging our bodies in prayer helps draw our whole being into the act of worship, moving our faith forward on the long journey from head to heart.

Whether you are a cradle Catholic who learned to make the *Sign of the Cross* as a child, a convert who learned it later in life, or a journeyer just now discovering this practice as you explore the Catholic Church, take some time this Lenten season to "cross yourself"—slowly, deliberately, reverently—remembering Our Lord and engaging your body in prayer.

It is Good that You Exist

One reason Catholics make the *Sign of the Cross* and place crucifixes in our homes, offices, and at the center of our churches, is that the cross is a constant, visible reminder of God's amazing love for us. More than that, the crucifix, with its static image of the pain and suffering Our Lord willingly endured for our sake, directs our attention to the depth and steadfastness of that love.

How does God love us? Joseph Pieper notes in his essay on charity, that we use the word "love" in a variety of ways, for a variety of persons and objects, indicating a variety of relationships that are all different but analogous in some way. According to Pieper, a key central thread that connects all of the types of love is an *affirmation of the existence of the other*—that is, saying with God about His creation: *it is good that you exist*. We ourselves are included in this creation and in God's declaration about it: *It is good that you and I exist*.

A key part of our entire spiritual journey in this life is deciding whether or not we stand with God in this declaration of love for His creation. In our heart of hearts it is still an open question. We discover this existential uncertainty whenever we become angry, frustrated, doubtful, or afraid. At such moments we scramble to fix things on our own—ourselves, others, the world—because we have temporarily lost faith and hope in the God who remains in control and never wavers in His declaration: *it is good that you exist*. From the beginning of the human story in the Garden of Eden, our downfall has always been losing sight of the reality of God's steadfast love.

Even in the moments when we sin against God—even as He was nailed to the Cross by the Roman soldiers—Our Lord never wavers in His unconditional love for us. He holds us in existence even as we use the gifts of life and free will to turn away from Him—for He is patient, and intent on our salvation. Let us remember God's steadfast and patient love during this Lenten Season. He declares of His creation—you and I included—*it is good that you exist*, and the cross remains our enduring sign of just how far He is willing to go to reveal this love to us. May we accept this love and embrace the cross anew today.

Update us on Your Journey

If you are in OCIA or are otherwise preparing to enter the Catholic Church, please reach out and let us know how the journey is going! We want to answer any questions you might have, pray for and with you as you prepare to receive the sacraments, and celebrate with you as you enter this new stage of the journey.

In Christ,

JonMarc Grodi, Executive Director

CONVERSION CONVERSATIONS

In speaking with those who are exploring the Catholic faith, we sometimes notice different themes emerge. It can be helpful to hear how those questions are answered by others as we consider our own responses should we ever be on the receiving end of the question ourselves. Below is an excerpt of a conversation between an inquirer and Matt Swaim, Director of Outreach:

R. A., an Inquirer: How do you balance the onslaught of information in religious education with becoming a Catholic who has a personal relationship with God—how do I solve the head/heart conundrum?

Matt's Response: I absolutely had to sort through that kind of thing; I still do with some regularity, if I'm honest. I think it comes from the particular kind of Evangelicalism I was in, which emphasized the familiar/relational aspects of God—a lot of language about “personal relationship” and a primary emphasis on friendship with God.

At the same time, there wasn't a strong emphasis on the intellectual aspects of Christian faith—at least not until I got to college. When I discovered them, it was like walking into a candy store, and I got very prideful about what I was learning, a lot of which was pointing to the transcendent, infinite, and philosophical questions about Christianity. It was confusing and exciting at the same time, and when I got beyond C.S. Lewis and into people who'd been dead a lot longer than him, it got even more exciting and confusing.

Catholicism wasn't on my radar until well into this exploration, and while I can't put my finger on all of it, I can say that the Church is very old and wise and understands human beings very well. The Church knows that if she is to be universal, and the true Body of Christ, there has to be room for peasants *and* kings, for scholars *and* those with intellectual disabilities, for introverts *and* extroverts. St. Gregory once described all of it as being like a river, where it's shallow enough for a lamb

to cross in one part and deep enough for an elephant to swim in another part. It has to hold up to intellectual scrutiny, but it also has to speak to the deepest desires of the human heart. St. Paul appeals to the intellect when he says “test everything; hold on to what is good” (1 Thes 5:21), but he appeals to our human longings when he says “the Spirit himself intercedes for us in groans that cannot be expressed.” (Rom 1:26)

In terms of the head/heart conundrum, my advice is to tap back into the realizations that got you excited about Christianity in the first place, because those are absolutely still valuable. I know I can get inside my own head, and sometimes I just need to experience silence, meditation, and prayer instead of research and study and diving into arguments. Have you checked out Eucharistic Adoration yet? Or had a chance to visit some beautiful area parishes to just look around and soak it in? I know those things have helped me when my head and heart seem to be in conflict with one another. But most of all be patient with yourself; absorbing Catholicism is like eating five thousand elephants.

And while there's plenty to learn as Catholics, I have to constantly remind myself that Catholicism isn't about knowing a lot of information. It's about entering ever more deeply into a relationship with God, Who is love. St. John Chrysostom, one of the smartest people in the history of the Church, said that “In the evening of our life, we will be judged on love alone.” Or as St. Bonaventure put it, a little more pointedly, when asked if only the learned could be saints: “Any old woman can love God better than a doctor of theology can.”

There's still time to join us for the

CHNetwork 2024

Spring Retreat

April 22–25

Maria Stein, OH

CHNetwork Retreats are great opportunities to meet (or catch up with) our staff and other members of the network for a time of discussion, prayer, and fellowship. Intended for both converts and those on the road to Catholicism, whether lay or clergy, the goal is to meet with others who are facing tough questions or decisions, and to encourage all in an ever deeper walk with Christ. For more information, or to register, visit chnetwork.org/retreats. We hope to see you there!

**Beginning
with the Easter
Triduum as its
source of light,
the new age of
the Resurrection
fills the whole
liturgical year
with its brilliance.**

CCC 1168

Joyful Journey Updates

From Amanda B.

A little over a year ago, I received a message in the CHNetwork Community from a woman named Chanea. We chatted back and forth, and quickly realized we had a lot in common. We were both from a Church of Christ background and were raised in the same area. A couple of days later, a woman approached me after Mass on All Saints Day, and as soon as she said “are you Amanda?” I said “Chanea?” It was quite a funny exchange, as we immediately knew who the other was. We decided we needed to have a “girls date” and met at one of my favorite restaurants in Dallas for Thai food. We immediately had a strong connection, and Chanea was able to counsel me on becoming Catholic, as I was going through a difficult time receiving strong resistance from my family regarding my conversion. I was also worried about what my friends would think regarding my conversion. She became someone I could confide in and talk to about my difficulties, and we continued, along with another mutual friend, to have monthly Catholic girls’ nights.

A couple of months later, my husband and I found out the wonderful news that I was pregnant with our second baby, and I asked Chanea to be the godmother. I did not grow up in a tradition where we had godparents, but I learned in RCIA



what a big honor it is to be a godparent, and that it is a decision one should not take lightly. I wanted someone who was a strong Catholic, but who also had the love, compassion and understanding I would want in someone to guide my child in the faith. This photo was taken on October 29, 2023, at Christ the King Catholic Church in Dallas when my daughter, Cora Anne, was baptized in Christ, with her godmother, Chanea, by my side. If it wasn’t for The Coming Home Network, we would most likely not have met. I am so very grateful for the relationship I now have with Chanea and the blessing she’s been in my family’s life! ■

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

“We adore you, O Lord Jesus Christ, in this church and all the churches of the world, and we bless you, because by your holy Cross you have redeemed the world. Amen.”
ST. FRANCIS OF ASSISI

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, Mar. 4

Jeremy McLellan

Former Presbyterian

Monday, Mar. 11

Paul Rose

Former Evangelical

Monday, Mar. 18

Don McLane

Former Presbyterian & Anglican

Monday, Mar. 25

Seth Haines

Former Evangelical Protestant

Monday, April 1

Rachel Lu

Former Latter Day Saint

Orig. Air Date 2/24/20

Schedule is subject to change.

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



Kathy Norman
Compass Donor since 2017—7 Years

PARTNERS IN
Mission

I was born in San Diego and baptized as an infant in the Lutheran church. Later in middle school I experienced God in a very personal and profound way—I felt His presence convicting me of my sin at a youth crusade, and I prayed to ask His forgiveness through Christ. The faith I had been drawn to since childhood became alive to me that night, through a lived-experience of conversion in a moment of sheer grace. Years later, as a newlywed, I enjoyed involvement in various Protestant churches as my husband and I grew in our faith together.

In 2016, while still a Protestant Christian, a Catholic friend recommended a book called *Evangelical Exodus* about dozens of students, alumni, and professors who came to believe in the teachings of the Catholic Church through their studies of Church history. The subject of the book intrigued me, and completely shook my world as I knew it. As I continued to read other books such as *Rome Sweet Home* and the *Surprised by Truth* series, I found myself on an unexpected quest for the truth of the Church's history as it had been handed down from Christ through the Apostles, and from them to the early Church Fathers.

What I discovered, to my great surprise, was that the consistent and well documented history of the church was Catholic in its understanding and practice, particularly the belief in the Real Presence. Being exposed for the first time to the writings of our early Church Fathers, would prove to be the turning point for me in my eventual conversion.

The Coming Home Network was extremely helpful to me when I was seeking answers, initially by providing me with a sponsor for RCIA when I needed one, as I didn't know any practicing Catholics in our area. The weekly *Journey Home* programs were like a lifeline that helped me keep moving forward when my whole world was on tilt. I also enjoyed a CHNetwork retreat in the Seattle area, and found further encouragement through their wonderful monthly newsletter, which I still love to read.

I have found CHNetwork to be a faithful, caring, and supportive apostolate that has helped many of us navigate the sometimes difficult waters of conversion. I decided at the beginning of my journey that this was a ministry I wanted to contribute to, not only because they meant so much to my journey, but also are doing so much to help others on the way home. Your support will make a difference! ■

Kathy Norman has been supporting The Coming Home Network with a monthly gift since 2017. If you would like to join her and our ever-growing family of donors with a one-time or monthly gift, use the enclosed envelope, or give online at chenetwork.org/donate

“The patient and humble endurance of the Cross—whatever nature it may be—is the highest work we have to do.”

ST. KATHERINE DREXEL, FEAST DAY: MARCH 3

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& BOARD OF DIRECTORS**

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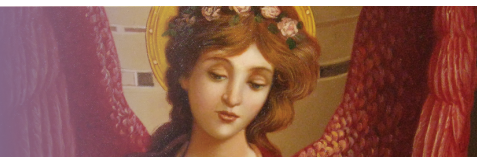
The Coming Home
Network International

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

TAX LETTERS

Tax letters for 2023 contributions will be e-mailed to donors who have email addresses on file. If you would like to receive your tax letter by postal mail, please contact **Ann Moore** at ann@chnetwork.org or 740.450.1175 x101.

Prayer List



Clergy

■ **For John, a Baptist pastor** living in a world of Baptists, who is quickly becoming convinced that he will need to become Catholic and wondering how he will have the courage to do it and lead his family into it.

■ **For Drew, a priest of the Orthodox Anglican church**, who has been drawn to the Catholic Church and exploring the idea of becoming Catholic for a number of years and has recently become more serious about this journey.

■ **For Hunter, a Protestant seminary student**, who is quickly becoming convinced that he will need to become Catholic and praying for the wisdom to take the next steps and to lead his family home.

■ **For James, an Episcopal priest**, who is struggling with the direction of the Episcopal church, sensing the Holy Spirit is leading him toward the Catholic Church, and needing prayer for how to navigate this with his family and the need to support his family.

■ **For Sergio, a Christian Reformed preacher**, who is struggling a great deal with feeling that he may have moved too quickly when he left his ministry to enter the Catholic Church while still working through many issues – doctrinal, personal, and vocational.

■ **For Walter, a former Assemblies of God pastor**, who, with his wife, was welcomed into full communion with the Church at the Easter Vigil in 2023 and is already developing a parish ministry to serve families who have dependents with intellectual disabilities.

■ **For Ignatio, an Episcopal priest**, who has begun to explore becoming Catholic and is praying for the possibility of being ordained a Catholic priest through the Ordinariate of the Chair of Saint Peter.

■ **For Ken, a Baptist pastor**, who is drawn to the Church and seeking wisdom and guidance on how best to proceed in an environment where very few of those who know him will understand what he is coming to believe.

■ **For Jacob, a pastor in a very anti-Catholic Protestant denomination**, who is coming to the conviction that Catholicism is true and desperately needs prayer for the Lord's assistance in opening up to his wife and determining what to do.

■ **For Ruth, a former Lutheran pastor**, who has left the ministry, found work, and become Catholic and is in the process of learning to live in a whole new spiritual country and speak a whole new language.

■ **For Andy, a former Evangelical pastor**, who has left the ministry and found work but continues to attend church with his wife and kids, struggling to even discuss the things he now believes.

■ **For Stephen, a Church of Christ pastor** who has become interested in the Catholic Church and begun to seek out Catholic community.

Laity

■ **For Elizabeth, a non-denominational Protestant**, that she find time to rest and focus on God.

■ **For Paula, a United Reformed member**, that she may receive wisdom, love and courage to carry her through this journey to the Church.

■ **For Kirsten, a Baptist**, that God grants her courage as she continues her journey, and that she may receive understanding from family and friends.

■ **For Katie, who is on the journey**, that she may receive blessings as she prepares to enter the Church soon and that she and her fiancé continue to seek holiness as they prepare to marry.

■ **For Misty, who is on the journey**, that the direction of God's will for her and her family is made clear to her.

■ **For Stephanie, a Catholic**, that she and her fiancé are granted good health, and that they may seek the will of God in their lives.

■ **For Anita, a Pentecostal**, that she continues to persevere in her faith journey to the Church, and gains wisdom and understanding and family unity in a common faith.

■ **For a seeker who is in OCIA**, that she may receive consolation after the loss of her beloved cat and healing from a current illness that is causing a lot of pain.

■ **For Matthew, an Eastern Orthodox brother**, that our Lord Jesus would guide him to embrace full-communication with the Successor of St. Peter.

■ **For Charles, an Episcopalian**, that his doctrinal struggle may guide him to the truth delivered once for all by the Apostles of the Catholic Church.

■ **For Anthony, a Pentecostal in Virginia**, that God would open the hearts of his friends and family to his journey to the Catholic faith.

■ **For Davis in Virginia**, who hasn't practiced his faith for fifteen years, through God's grace he would return to the sacraments.

■ **For Michael, a former Agnostic in Minnesota**, that he may find a parish where he feels at home and can complete his OCIA journey.

■ **For Nenad, an Anglican in Serbia**, that our Lord Jesus would guide him to return Home to the Catholic Church.

■ **For Ben, a Baptist**, that Jesus may work his will in his life.

■ **For Brett, a Non-denominational Evangelical in Michigan**, that he may become stronger in his faith and fully assured of God's love for him.

Did the experience of COVID-19 play a role in your decision to dig deeper into the Catholic Faith?

It's been four years since the world shut down due to the COVID-19 pandemic. While the experience of that time brings up varied emotions and memories for us all, many found that it also created a space and desire for reflection. For various reasons, people felt called to deepen their understanding of faith, leading many to explore the Catholic Church. We asked our community members whether the pandemic played a role in leading them to dig deeper into the Catholic faith, and here is what some of them said:

Brian B.

In an indirect way, yes. While I've had an appreciation for more high church worship and liturgy for a long time, I was deep into the Evangelical Covenant Church and seeking ordination. COVID hit our congregation hard like many churches and, in my opinion, we lost many families due to how long we stayed closed. After fully reopening and trying to keep family/youth ministry going, the church decided a full time pastor in that area wasn't something they could retain. It was in my time searching for other churches to attend, and a desire to deepen my pursuit of holy living, that I got more and more drawn to Catholicism.

Patty B.

Yes! The extra time at home allowed me to follow along with *On the Journey* and read through the Catechism. Specifically I started teaching remote English lessons, and in the five minutes before classes, I would read through a few pieces of the Catechism.

Jennifer R.

Yes, I think so. All our routines were thrown off that year. It was a "shakeup" that helped me study the Church even deeper. Plus, our Baptist church wasn't meeting in person, so it helped me to disconnect from it.

Darlene M.

ABSOLUTELY YES!!! It gave me lots of time to read, study, and explore without any commitments to or expectations from our previous church. I had already become curious to explore my childhood roots in Catholicism a few years prior to the pandemic. After things started to open up we began attending Mass in June 2021 and by Aug 2021 I made an appointment with our pastor to reconcile with the Church. By October I was back in full communion and able to receive the Eucharist.

Anna Y.

Not directly, but the pandemic did cause me to reevaluate our church situation, generally. Being dissatisfied with our church already served to remove most of the barriers I probably would have had to exploring the Catholic faith. Since I no longer had close ties and was underwhelmed with worship and preaching, I was longing for something. Something I couldn't define. Then the Catholic "spark" happened, as if all the seeds planted over a lifetime suddenly sprouted into life, and I've been studying the Catholic faith ever since, though we still attend the same church at this time.

Are you entering the Church this Easter or celebrating an anniversary of your entrance to the Church? Email info@chnetwork.org and let us know!

Our CHNetwork Board & Staff are celebrating how long they've been members of the Catholic Church:

Marcus Grodi - 31 years
Former Presbyterian Pastor

Msgr. Jeffrey Steenson - 17 years
Former Episcopal Bishop

Kevin Lowry - 32 years
Former Presbyterian

Donald Brey - 28 years
Former Methodist/Episcopalian

JonMarc Grodi - 31 years
Former Presbyterian

Ken Hensley - 27 years
Former Baptist Minister

Jim Anderson - 43 years
Former Lutheran

Melissa Slagle - 18 years
Former Baptist

Kenny Burchard - 5 years
Former Foursquare Pastor

Matt Swaim - 19 years
Former Methodist

Rakhi McCormick - 28 years
Former Hindu

Seth Paine - 16 years
Former Non-denominational Christian

Bill Bateson - 21 years
Former Secularist

Br. Rex Anthony Norris - 24 years
Former Anglican

Ann Moore
Lifelong Catholic

normal worship and music routine. During the chaos of the shutdown, I was called upon quite often from various contacts to help fill in with playing guitar and singing while churches scrambled, deciding who was more at risk or what services would be kept and which would go fully online. Streaming and production quality were now of utmost importance. We had a show to do, after all.

Around that time, the Chesterton Society sent out an update, saying they were going to start streaming the Mass on their YouTube channel from a local parish in Minnesota, as all in-person gatherings were prohibited across the country. Intrigued, I tuned in to watch one day, and what I saw changed my life.

No studio-quality sound, no multi-camera shots and production lighting. It looked like someone was holding up a phone, and live-streaming the event. I had never even seen a Mass before, but it was most beautiful thing I'd ever seen. The reverence and care taken, especially while preparing Communion, the beauty of what was unfolding, is hard to put into words even now. I just remember tears falling down my face, wondering what I had witnessed. Was that what actually happened at a Mass?

Suddenly, attending church became important. Being there became important. I wanted to be there! The preaching (I didn't even know it was called a homily) cut through me because of its absolute hopefulness. I immediately rewatched the whole thing with my wife Valiree, saying, "You need to watch this." Her reaction was the same as mine: tears filled her eyes.

We couldn't get enough. Every opportunity we had and every posting on the Chesterton YouTube channel, we watched—Daily Mass, choir concerts, Easter Vigil, everything. One morning, I remember watching Mass early, and my son, then 5 years old, came down and started watching it with me. He asked why there was a cross, and why Jesus was on it. It broke my heart! We had a wonderful moment talking through the meaning of the sacrifice made for us on the cross. If anyone needs an example of why having a crucifix in church is important, this is it.

What Did We Just See?

Feeling somewhat overwhelmed and surprised at the reaction we had to everything we were seeing, I did what any responsible Protestant would do: I immediately purchased a copy of the Reformed theologian R.C. Sproul's *Are We Together?: A Protestant Analyzes Roman Catholicism*. There must have been something I was missing, something that would show me why we weren't all Catholics, and I was looking to Sproul to help identify it. This project did not have the desired effect. I would read passages from that book out loud to Valiree and ask her, "Do you agree with that?" "Of course I do," would mostly be her response, to which I would emphatically say, "That's Catholic!" It seemed like almost everything we learned through reading our Bibles and growing up in the Assemblies of God was in line with what I

was reading about Catholicism.

We researched as a family and continued to watch Mass online. While I continued to lead worship and play guitar at our church every Sunday, something didn't seem right anymore. Something had changed, and it scared me to death.

I Can't Be a Catholic!

Still skeptical, I thought maybe there was something in the Catholic Catechism that would be my "Gotcha!" moment to dispel these beliefs. What a mistake that was! Not only was I agreeing with Catholicism as outlined in the Catechism, I found myself mentally *defending their beliefs* when I compared it with things I would hear or read regarding things like the "whore of Babylon" or a lack of a "personal relationship" with Jesus. I knew it wasn't true, because I was actually reading what Catholics believe. I also knew what I had read in the Bible, and those two things lined up!

As I continued to research, enthusiastically sharing everything I was learning with my wife, I kept thinking over and over, "But we can't be Catholic." Who has ever heard of such a thing—Pentecostal, spirit-filled believers leaving the religion of their family and giving up all they've ever known? I remembered Chesterton and *The Apostle of Common Sense* show I used to watch. What channel was it? Some religious one with a nun. Maybe I can get my fill of Catholic teaching on the side, tuning in occasionally to fill in some of the gaps I was feeling with our own church.

Then, after work one day, in the late spring of 2020, I tuned in to EWTN on satellite radio, just to see if the content was similar to that of the Chesterton show I used to watch. As if on cue, I joined in the middle of a program called *The Journey Home*. "Wait," I thought, "Did they just mention they were former Protestants who converted to Catholicism?!" I wish now I could remember who it was that was being interviewed, but I was floored. These people do exist! Converts from Protestantism do exist! It became a normal dinnertime listen on Monday nights for months as my wife and I talked through, and related to, the interviews of others who had "crossed over the Tiber."

We continued opening the door a little more. Over the summer, we would watch Mass as much as we could online, and like any good virtual parishioner, signed up for Catholic content providers like FORMED and others, using our "virtual parish" to sign up. All the kids wanted was to be part of it. They begged us to be baptized and to receive *real Communion* like they saw others doing during online Mass. They hungered for it, and I envied them. What was once the simplest and most forgotten part of my church experience had now become the one thing they wanted most at church.

I Will Be Catholic No Matter What!

It was *then* we realized that to be a Catholic was to be fully Christian. How could we not do this? We needed to do something about it. I tried to recall what that Catholic parish it was that we used to drive by when I was a kid, when we'd

joke about all the Catholics trying to hurry to get to Mass, causing a traffic jam at the stop sign. We looked it up online, and I found the priest's email address. If anything, the process of discovering Catholicism and becoming increasingly excited about finding this "pearl of great price" (Matthew 13:45-46) does make you bold—bold enough to knock on every door you can find.

During this time of COVID lockdowns in the fall of 2020, churches were just starting to open back up with extremely limited reservations-only style online ticketing, with temperature checks at the door. Though the website said it was restricting in-person attendance to current parishioners only, we didn't care. We had to see a Catholic Mass in person, and I would register us as quickly as slots became available for that week so we would not miss out. I emailed the priests (all of them on the contact list; I didn't know the differences or why there was more than one at this point), explained our situation a bit, and asked for a meeting.

What we heard back was not entirely encouraging: "Please call the office to schedule a meeting." Upon calling, the main priest had availability a week or so later, so we put that on the calendar. In the meantime, we kept attending in person as much as possible, and we began observing all that was around us: why do they kneel? When do they kneel? Googling "What to do at your first Catholic Mass," we mostly sat toward the back to not look too out of place.

When the time came for our first meeting with the priest, we shared our story...and he hesitated. He said, "I've heard of people like you, but I've never actually met one. Why would you want to be a Catholic now? Are you sure you want to do this? You'll create absolute chaos in your family!" I responded quickly, "Because it's the truth!" I'm sure my face said, "Duh!" Unfortunately, this was one of many encounters on our journey over the years with priests that didn't quite know how to handle us or the situation we found ourselves in. We were somewhat demoralized, but this was counterbalanced by a wonderful RCIA (Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults) instructor who had heard about us and would sneak us into Mass whether we had a reservation or not. We wanted it so badly, and she knew it. She was more than happy to go out of her way for the four of us.

After a few months of RCIA and absorbing everything we could, Valiree and I were confirmed in the Catholic Church on Divine Mercy Sunday (the Sunday following Easter), April 11, 2021. My kids, eager to move past just receiving a blessing in the Communion line to fully receiving the Eucharist themselves, asked us both with excitement and wonder after we received our first Holy Communion, "What was it like?" "Home," I said. It tasted like I'd come home.

Our kids finished up RCIC (Rite of Christian Initiation for Children) while Valiree and I both served in the RCIA class helping *other converts* learn about the Church. We also began volunteering in various other ministries at our parish, helping out wherever we could. Then, on Easter Vigil in 2022,

my son and daughter were both baptized, confirmed, and received their first Holy Communion, something they both were anxiously awaiting.

His Ways Are Higher

For many, the pandemic brought out the worst in people. But even years before, something much darker was making its way through charismatic Protestant circles. Genuine men and women of God were starting to turn their backs on their faith in large numbers as praise and worship artists, Christian authors, and popular pastors we grew up with and learned Christianity from in the 90s were suddenly renouncing their faith. This startling trend was made worse by the church shutdowns of 2020, and sadly, to this day I still hear of those I served with who haven't returned since, their disenchantment with religion reaching a boiling point.

Yet here we were, somehow able to find the deeper truth instead of abandoning it. It has been incredible to reflect on the people and the connections God has sent us along this journey, and how everything unfolded over the last few years. There were challenges, and I had my apprehensions, wondering to myself many times, "How could this be?" But here we were.

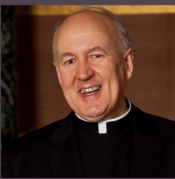
During our first RCIA classes in the midst of the pandemic, only a few of us met together, masked up and six feet apart. After one session, I went up to our instructor (who knew our background at that point) and asked him fervently, and maybe even with a little bit of fear, "Why me? Why my family? Why now?" He then looked me in the eyes, put a hand on my shoulder and said, "Because you listened."

Even now, as I reflect on the circumstances that led to our conversion, I am in awe at the hand of God gently guiding me, nudging me, and showing me a closeness to Him and His Son that, even growing up in a very charismatic tradition, I had never felt before. For us, it wasn't about leaving anything. It was about entering into the fullness of Christianity—the same Christianity that was handed down to me from my parents and grandparents, just made complete in the Catholic Church. ■

A former music minister in the Pentecostal tradition, Lee and his wife were received into the Catholic Church on Divine Mercy Sunday in 2021, and their two children were received into the Church on Easter in 2022. Originally from Las Vegas, Nevada, Lee and his family now live in the New York City Metropolitan area where he currently works for Public Housing. Shortly after moving to the East Coast, he and his wife started the formation process of becoming Lay Dominicans in the Province of Saint Joseph, Eastern USA Lay Fraternities of Saint Dominic, and are deeply involved in their local parish and a Catholic Charismatic community in the area as they continue to live out the joys, as a family, of being fully Catholic.

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