

Dear Minister Jesse,

(Editor's note: COC stands for the denomination called Church of Christ).

When we meet Sunday, I thought you were just curious about my conversion. I felt a little on the spot then and on the defense because many people in the COC circle would not really care to know why, but would just write me off. I recognize that as COC leaders, ministers, and laity become more open minded and educated that civil discussion and understanding become possible.

I did not convert for a significant other, friend, or family - the most common reasons, I think, that people join a religious movement. My conversion started out completely for theological reasons. I think the seeds were planted early on. I'll divide it up into phases.

Until age 18: I attended a very conservative COC, going every time the doors were open. I believed most of what was said, except that only COC members were Christians - my grandparents and an aunt belong to a protestant denomination; to me, they were model Christians. Sometimes I ran across something in scripture that would bother me, like looking in the margin notes for Mt. 16 and finding that Peter means "rock" in Greek. But, I was very anti-Catholic, even silently cheering when the Pope was shot!

Age 19 - 27: Mostly attended COC, but also attended different Protestant churches. I was very confused by the diversity of teachings in different traditions. I read the NT several times and was able to see how these different groups honestly arrived at their theology. Can they all be right and still disagreeing? - Perhaps I wouldn't have cared if I wasn't raised in a church that claimed possession of the right interpretation. Also, I was exposed to scientific theories that contradicted conservative COC teachings - this was disturbing and caused me to have doubts about God in general.

Age 28 - 32: I didn't want to attend a COC anymore. I just got tired of saying, "yes that's what they teach, but I don't believe that". In addition, the COC has a bad reputation in Tallahassee because of the activities of the International Church of Christ here. Not wanting to start my own church, I wrote a list of things that I believed based on my reading, experience, and common sense and used the net to find the closest fit. I started attending a tiny Lutheran church (although I joined that church, I didn't become Lutheran).

Then I saw the documentary, "From Jesus to Christ" and started reading books on the "historical Jesus". In 1998, I had my first breakthrough - Peter was the leader of the early Christians. Non-believing scholars were clear that this is what the gospel writers "wanted us to think". With this new understanding, I read the gospels and Acts again and they made more sense. I was fairly objective during this period because my faith was weak, and I was very open-minded.

To better understand the Lutheran teaching on the Eucharist, I used the net and came across writings of the "Church Fathers" - writings from the 1st 4 centuries of the early church! What a treasure!

In early 2002, I began communicating online with informed ex-Catholics in an attempt to understand why they now rejected the clear teaching of the fathers in regard to the Eucharist; why only the Catholic and Orthodox traditions retained the belief of the fathers. I found this extraordinary because there is so much diversity in the protestant traditions, yet none of them teach the literal "body and blood". I remembered how in the COC we would say "which to us 'represents' or 'symbolizes' the body and blood". I asked myself "why did we do this?" It's not scriptural. (Mk 14, Lk 22, Jn 6, 1Cor 10-11).

Age 32 - 34 (present)

The final straw was when I read about the Council of Nicaea and the canonization of the bible. I began to understand that if the Catholic and Orthodox churches are fundamentally flawed, then all of Christianity is. In April 2002, I was compelled to visit a Catholic church. I've been going weekly ever since. I started RCIA last year and was confirmed this Easter (2004).

For me, I was either going to be Catholic, Orthodox, or something completely different and non-Christian. I choose Catholic because it's the western side of Christendom. If I lived in Russia or Greece, I honestly may have become Orthodox – with strong affections for the Pope. I pray along with many Catholic and Orthodox for the reunification of these two ancient traditions.

The Catholic Church is not perfect, and neither is my belief in her teachings (although I'm working on this), and I miss many of the good things that are in the protestant traditions (like devotion to the word of God, and some really outstanding teachers, like yourself), but I don't regret for a second my decision. I'm at peace. In many ways, becoming Catholic has freed me to live Christianity. No longer do I have to set myself up as my own pope.

Thanks for your interest in my conversion. I love telling the story. I'll close by saying that many of the Catholic Church's teachings may have been easier to accept for me than people coming from other backgrounds. There are a few similarities that the Catholic church shares with the COC that she doesn't share with protestant churches, like: weekly Lord's Supper (actually the Eucharist is offered daily at large Catholic churches), salvation as a process and not a one time experience, the role of faith and good works in the salvation process, and the belief that Jesus founded an institution or pillar of truth that serves as a guide for our beliefs.

I hope that I have answered your question in a non-offensive way. I'd be happy to provide references or clarification. Thanks again for your warm welcome and understanding.

Yours in Christ,
Farrell