

## Another Episcopalian Crosses the Tiber and Returns Home

Sometimes it has been difficult for me to articulate what my Catholic journey means to me. It is an enormous gift with immeasurable rewards. It is not destined to wind-up in the basement or attic, unused and later discarded after neglect. My name is Rick, I am 52 years old, and I want to share my story of crossing the Tiber and coming into Communion with the Catholic Church.

I am the youngest child (and only boy) of four. My mother came from France and was raised Catholic. She had a very poor and unhappy life in France, and these circumstances no doubt negatively affected her outlook on life. She emigrated to the U.S. in 1951, bringing with her two young girls, children born of a relationship that she had with a married man in France. The affair ended, and she came to America looking for a new start. She joined family members living in Norfolk, Virginia. She met my dad, a naval officer, when he was stationed there. They were married in 1954. My mother was not an outwardly devout woman, and she rarely, if ever, shared her religious beliefs or convictions. I was not close with her. As I look back on her life, I often wonder how her early upbringing affected her faith. She died in 2004, alone.

My dad was from Baltimore. Like my mother, he too was not religious, nor did he ever share any religious beliefs with me. I never knew if he was ever baptized. He was a descent man, but private and un-demonstrative with his feelings. We became closer as I got older. Despite his aloof nature, I came to accept that he loved me, and I knew that he provided for me the best way he could. That was how he expressed his love. He died in 1986.

The strongest religious influence in my life was my paternal aunt. She was a devout Episcopalian. She was a kind, sincere woman with an unassuming and humble charisma. She was admired and respected by all who knew her. She did not preach her beliefs; she lived them. She set a wonderful *ecumenical* example of what it meant to be a Christian.

My parents divorced when I was very young. My mom returned to Norfolk with my sisters and me, and my dad remained in Baltimore. I missed not having my dad around the house, and I would wait anxiously by the window during the infrequent times when he would come to visit us.

When I was very young, in the years leading up to Vatican II, my mom would take us to Sunday Mass at the local Catholic church in Norfolk. She and my two older sisters (both baptized but un-catechized Catholics) did not participate in the sacraments. My youngest sister and I were un-baptized. Regardless, we were expected to behave with reverence at Mass. As an un-baptized child, I developed a strong sense of unworthiness and self-consciousness about the church. I am sure this is why I evidentially came to resent the Catholic faith. I'm not sure why it happened, but by 1965, we suddenly stopped going to Mass. We never went back as a family.

When I was 14 years old, my mother, never emotionally stable, threw me out of the house. I went to live with my dad in Baltimore. Never remarried, he lived with my two unmarried aunts. I'm sure my sudden presence was disruptive to their lives, but they all treated me with great kindness, affection, and patience. I brought a lot of emotional baggage with me to Baltimore. I was withdrawn, angry, and full of self-loathing. My dad and I had difficulty bonding. Despite it all, I finished ninth grade in Baltimore, and by the fall of 1971 I started tenth grade in a new school. It was a boarding school, located outside Philadelphia, and it was affiliated with the Episcopal Church.

Within a nine-month period, I had moved and changed schools three times. It was a huge culture shock for me. Looking back, I don't know how I kept it together. I became even more withdrawn and shy. Because I had difficulty making friends, I was comfortable being a loner. I struggled academically. *God was not a part of my life.*

Weekly and Sunday church services were mandatory in school, and by the time I was in the eleventh grade, I was comfortable enough with the Episcopal Church services that I decided to join that faith. I enrolled in a class to prepare me to receive Baptism and Confirmation. The decision was entirely mine to make, and I was eager for it. It was the early Seventies, and I was caught up in the euphoria and popularity of the Born Again movement. *Jesus Christ Superstar* and *Godspell* were very popular, and I loved listening to them frequently. For the moment, I was optimistic.

Toward the end of the program, I began to experience serious doubts about faith, my beliefs, and Christianity. I am sure that it was just anxiousness on my part, but I wondered: *Who was Jesus anyway? Was He the Prince of Peace? Was he a complicated, half-crazed, and manipulative fanatic? Was he merely a prophet, and nothing more?* I was beginning to have difficulty accepting the idea of a Virgin Birth. How could such a thing have occurred? It seemed too overwhelming for an immature sixteen year old to understand. To make matters worse, I was too scared and ashamed to talk about it. I feared ridicule. I began to lose interest and enthusiasm as my understanding of Jesus became more and more confusing.

Despite my lack of enthusiasm and doubts, I received Baptism and Confirmation. It would be months before I summoned any interest in my new faith to receive my first communion. Because I was too immature to realize the enormity of these gifts, and too poorly prepared, *my faith remained like an un-watered seed that does not take root and thrive.*

Gradually, I became comfortable with my faith (such as it was). After graduation, I returned to live with my dad in Baltimore. Foregoing college at the time, I worked full time. Occasionally, I would attend church with my aunt, but I found the Episcopal services in her parish insufferably *Catholic* and the rector of her church pompous. He would preside over the church services in regal attire, which I found distracting and inappropriate for a priest. I did not understand scripture or its meaning in my life. It was all just a bunch of words, comprised mostly of words like thee,

thou, and thy. Moreover, the Episcopal Church was undergoing new changes, most notably the introduction of women priests (I found it strange). The old feelings of uncertainty returned. As my dear aunt lovingly told me one day, *'Some things you just have to accept on faith'*.

Over the years, I would attend church only once in awhile, but sadly, I never was able to feel God's presence in church, or in my life for that matter. Moreover, my method of prayer didn't help either. I only prayed to God when I wanted something, and I got angry with Him when I did not get what I asked for. Eventually I lost interest in God. I did not believe in the devil and hell. I did not realize it at the time, but I was spiritually *'rudderless'*. It is not a good place to be, regardless if one is navigating the calm or rough seas of life.

In 1976, I enlisted in the Navy. My years of independence in boarding school helped me adjust to the rigors of day-to-day life in boot camp. I enjoyed the military life. It was challenging and stressful in the beginning, but the lifestyle suited me well. I felt fulfilled. In boot camp, I attended Sunday Protestant church services, and it was the one hour of the week where I was free of stress and worry. I enjoyed those Sunday services very much, but after leaving boot camp I stopped thinking about God and going to church. The few times I had any interest in going, I would chicken out at the last minute. I did not feel the connection to my faith or religion. Through the years, whenever I (rarely) attended Christmas or Easter services, I never felt the presence of God or Jesus. I began to question whether or not I was cut out to be a Christian. Maybe I was meant to be Jewish, or Buddhist, or something non-Christian. I became interested in the subject of religion - any religion - and I read about religions that interested me: Judaism, Unitarian, Buddhism, and New Age (gag). However, I never seriously considered any of them.

In 1989, I met a wonderful woman who I met thru my work. We were married in 1992. My wife was raised as a Catholic. The Army Chaplain who married us was a Presbyterian who used an Episcopal wedding service. Talk about ecumenical! I respected (and envied) the sense of faith that my wife experienced growing up. As we planned our life together, we shared a common desire for our (future) children's spiritual needs: they would be raised in a *Christian* faith. She wanted our children to enjoy the richness of a Christian life she had growing up. I wanted our children to have a close relationship with God that I never had. Because I felt that my wife had the strongest faith, I offered to let our children be raised Catholic. However, she sensed my uneasiness with Catholicism and agreed to raise them in the Episcopal faith, with the understanding that I must be a part of it. I agreed. I thought, with this new chapter in my life, I might finally be able to develop a relationship with God and the church.

By the time I retired from the Navy in 1997, we were blessed with two daughters. We settled in Maryland and joined an Episcopal parish in our town. We attended church weekly. I discovered, to my dismay, that the Episcopal Church had undergone some radical and political changes. These influences in church doctrine and practices

were disturbing to me. Despite changing parishes in 2001, I still was unable to feel God's presence in any Episcopal church that we attended. I became more and more frustrated with Christianity. I believed in God but not much else. A true relationship with Jesus continued to elude me. I *wanted* to believe, the problem was I *could not* believe. I dreaded Sundays. Each time I received Holy Communion I felt like a hypocrite. If I refused it, I would have to admit to my wife that I was unhappy with the Episcopal Church, and I was not sure if I believed in Jesus Christ or not. I feared it would spark a conversation with her, which would lead to a confession about my faith that I did not want to have with anyone.

By 2003, I had enough. Sensing my wife's growing unhappiness with the Episcopal Church, I quit the church, and religion. Just like that - I was finished with it all. From that moment, I considered myself a *former* Episcopalian. I decided that spirituality, not religion, was all that I needed. I had no faith in my religion and no religion in my faith. Religion was getting in the way of my relationship with God. It took a near tragedy (my wife had an accident in our home while alone) to wake me up to the realization that maybe I needed God more than I realized. I wondered what I would have done if the outcome of her accident had ended tragically. At that moment, it started to become apparent to me: Faith alone was not enough. I needed more, but how would I find it?

However, our God of Mercy gives us infinite 'second' chances, and He threw one my way. In late 2004, my family and I started attending Mass at our local Catholic parish. At the time, I had no expectations. Catholicism did not interest me. I went for the sake of my family and no other reason. Once again, I would sit on the sidelines, as I did as a kid back in Norfolk. I knew the routine.

However, *something happened*. We were welcomed to my new parish. The more I attended, the more I felt comfortable, at ease, and less guarded. Feeling at home there, I relaxed and started to listen to the Mass. I began to find it meaningful and relevant, along with the Scripture readings. I could relate what I was hearing to my own life. It was slowly starting to make sense! It was as if I was receiving a digital signal from God (no longer analog) and I was experiencing Him as never before! I watched and closely observed the consecration of the Eucharist (Transubstantiation), despite the fact that I could not receive it. I felt drawn by an undeniable presence in my life I had previously never felt. It became harder and harder to distance myself from what I was feeling during Mass. It was a feeling that I never had in an Episcopal service. I became aware of what was drawing me to Catholicism: Catholics believe - embrace - the Divine Presence of Jesus Christ in the Eucharist. It is the core of our belief. This is what was calling me. Maybe those early seeds of faith, planted at my baptism, finally found the water they needed in order to grow. Of course, I now realize this was the presence of the Holy Spirit working a miracle within me. God had chosen me, had called me, and now I could hear Him. I realized what I did not previously understand; *that in order to walk on a Journey of Faith; one must wear the right shoes*.

I surrendered to the Holy Spirit and decided to take the steps necessary to enter into full Communion with the Church. I admit that I was scared and apprehensive. I was afraid that I might fail (again) to develop a close relationship with God. Happily, my fear did not last long. I left my first meeting with RCIA feeling a peace I had never before known.

As I continued with the program, I did a lot of soul-searching about my faith. I thought back to what failed the first time. God did not fail me. I failed Him, by neglecting to accept and cultivate the seeds of faith that He gave me. With the Grace of the Holy Spirit, I experienced a conversion of heart. I prayed to the Lord, and I learned to open my heart *to hear* what *He had to tell me*. That was something I never before considered: praying is as much about listening to God as it is talking with Him. I learned to ask Him only for those things I needed, and I trusted Him to take care of the outcome. I attended Mass as often as possible, not to be *holier than thou*, but to be as *holy* as I could be. As a 'cafeteria' Episcopalian, I would often pick and choose the beliefs that made sense to me and disregard the rest. This time I would sit down and enjoy my new faith at God's table *family style*.

Despite years of receiving Holy Communion in the Episcopal Church, at the Easter Vigil in 2005 I received Jesus Christ for the first time in my life. My two daughters (thru a unique and special instruction provided by my parish) were also welcomed into the church with me. My cup ran over. The completeness I desperately needed was finally mine. I have never looked back.

So, how has my spiritual journey been? Great, I think. My wife and I had our Protestant marriage blessed in the Catholic Church. It was a very poignant moment for both of us. I am now a Catechist, help to lead others into the church thru the RCIA Program. I am also an Extraordinary Minister of the Eucharist. I realize now that I was always on a Journey of Faith. I just needed to wear the right shoes to make the journey possible. All good things come to those who wait. I am still a human being, and as such still prone to fail and fall into sin. Rather than languish *rudderless*, God has shown me His Grace and thrown me a *lifeline*.

**Amen, I believe**