

Dustin Mantz: Guitar playing, tatoocovered Methodist, now a Catholic. Here is his story.

Kicking and screaming. That's exactly how I would describe my entry into the Catholic Church. Much like a spoiled four year old in the candy aisle of the supermarket, except instead of disappointment after disappointment, it was much more akin to eye opening truth after eye opening truth.

I was born and raised in a small town in Texas, about 60 miles north of Houston called Huntsville. I was not brought up in a particularly Christian household, or religious for that matter. My mother had attended Sunday worship services in various faith traditions throughout her childhood, all stemming in part from Calvinistic theology with an evangelical twist. My father was a disfellowshipped Jehovah's Witness who rarely spoke of any sort of faith. So, as one could imagine I grew up in a rather secular household with some moral standard of good, but no moral lawgiver.

When I was 15 I started dating a young woman whose grandfather was a United Methodist pastor, and although he had left the active ministry, she still faithfully attended the church that he served every Sunday. After much prodding and poking, I submitted to attending with her and found that something spoke to me. Now, as I mentioned previously, I grew up in a secular household and for some time had anti-Christian leanings. But the "low liturgical" feel of the UMC service appealed to something deep inside.

It wasn't long that same year before I started on my spiritual walk, with the only person to confide in being myself. I had to work out a lot of the kinks on my own, and developed a deep love for Christ, and was sure that he could be found within the walls of

the UMC and that Bible. Some years later, at the age of 17 or 18, I defected from the UMC, entering back into a world of secularism and turmoil. I began working in nightclubs and bars, either bartending or security. I'll spare the nitty gritty details, but it led to a life of drug and alcohol abuse. My life wasn't working out particularly well, and I felt that a change of scenery was in order.

I had a dear friend working as a tattoo artist in the D/FW area, and I gave her a call. After explaining my situation, she informed me that her roommate had just moved out and that I could take the spare room. I took a position as a guitar repairman and sales associate at a local music store, where I met my wife. Enter Meghan, the Cradle Catholic. When we met, she wasn't particularly deep in her faith, but made it clear that she was Catholic and wasn't leaving to go to any other church. Throughout our relationship, we started to realize that we both needed to return to the Lord, for the benefit of our own souls and for the benefit of our marriage.

So, one Sunday morning we get up early, get dressed and head to Wesley Memorial United Methodist Church for the contemporary worship service. Now, mind you, there wasn't much contemporary going on there. Maybe some songs that were written in the 90's or 2000's as opposed to the 18 and 1900's. The traditional low liturgy remained, and the pastor was an amazing homilist. While my wife longed for something more, we both agreed that the sermons we heard were wonderful and we wouldn't go "church shopping" for a while, even though that particular congregation was experiencing a deep schism over morality and we were being pulled to take sides.

At the time I was working in EMS, and having much trouble reconciling these things that I knew to be true about God and what I saw in the back of my ambulance. After seeking much

council from the pastor who introduced me to the genius of C.S. Lewis through “The Problem of Pain”. I then took on “Mere Christianity”, “The Abolition of Man”, and “The Screwtape Letters”. This ignited an apologetic fire within my heart that I had to continue providing “wood” for. I started combing through the church’s small library, which mostly consisted of works by John Wesley.

I jumped feet first into William Lane Craig, Ravi Zacharias, Lee Stroble, and many others as far as protestant Christian apologetics. I devoured John Wesley’s theology and as soon as I found out they were available online, read every single one of his sermons, twice! I fell in love with the UMC, all the while my wife longed for her Catholic liturgy and the Eucharist, so we began attending the local Catholic parish while I continued in my personal studies and attendance in the United Methodist Church. Around this time I felt the Lord calling me to ministry, especially that of the ordained ministry within the UMC. I started looking in to their diaconate formation programs and came to the quick realization that I had nowhere close to their educational requirements.

So my journey started, looking at United Methodist Seminaries while my wife longed for the Catholic faith, and encouraged me to “Just look in to it”. And, as every man tends to do, I let her words go in one ear and out the other while I delved deeper into theology and Scripture study. I worked diligently on meeting the requirements for the diaconate. I had my letters of recommendation from friends and my pastor, I sent in my letter of intention to the bishop, and had started my studies. I continued working in EMS, theology books covering the floorboard of the ambulance as my partner and I sat out waiting for a call to come through over the radio were spent hovering over this book or that book, perhaps even the big and intimidating Book of Discipline,

which is the basic equivalent to the Catechism of the Catholic Church. Even the name of it shoots fear into the hearts of the toughest men. But nevertheless, I continued on my journey, determined to change the world through ordination.

And then Augustine of Hippo came into play. Who would have thought that a man who lived in the fourth century would have such a profound impact on little ol' me? I started reading "Confessions" and I'm hanging on the edge screaming inside "This is me! This is me!". And then I found out he was *gasp* Catholic. All of a sudden, everything my wife had been speaking of about reaching back to her faith, about looking into the Church, about the saints, it all came rushing back in a heartbeat.

So, my Catholic search started, and I became skeptical of EVERY denomination. I went from thinking that the United Methodist Church finally got the bible right when John Wesley popped up on the scene, with his reductionist 25 Articles of Faith and breaking away from Anglicanism to questioning every Christian theology, every doctrine, every leader and every church. So I started looking into not only the Catholic Church, but also other Protestant claims to Truth. I started studying all this theology and was thinking to myself "Okay, I can see how all of this can come from Scripture, but what about the early guys? I mean, if Augustine in the 300's was Catholic, there had to be something there, right?" So I go out and pick up Catholicism for Dummies and the Penguin Classics "Early Christian Writings", which contained the life changing Epistle of Ignatius of Antioch to the Smyrnaeans. The funny thing is that I purchased the book used off Amazon, and thought nothing of it. There was nothing else underlined in the entire book except for that famous excerpt "Where the bishop is, let there people be in much the same way wherever Jesus Christ is there too is the Catholic Church".

This was earth shattering, to say the least. Here was a man writing in the earliest times of Christendom speaking of the Catholic Church, and I could find nothing in historical writings of the United Methodist Church. Furthermore, all these Catholic doctrines that I was having trouble overcoming, such as the Eucharist, purgatory, and the veneration of Mary, I'm reading all about it in the earliest Christian writings that are known to exist! There was nothing about Sola Scriptura, as Scripture hadn't even been compiled. Now, it wasn't merely Augustine and Ignatius that started me on my conversion, but after careful study of the Ante-Nicene Fathers and the Post-Nicene Fathers, I came to realize that every single Catholic/Orthodox belief could be found in the earliest years of Christianity. The ideas might not have been profoundly worded much like in the Catechism, but they were there, and they were believed.

So there I was, stuck between a rock and a hard place. I could either continue to violate the truth which I had found within historical searches and remain a member of the United Methodist Church, with whom I was becoming more and more disheartened with due to their lessening and removal of traditional Christian belief; or I could start RCIA and be received into the Church, give up on my diaconate formation within the UMC, leave the only church I had ever known, and follow Christ and the Church he established to the fullest. I met with my United Methodist pastor, almost as an emergency.

It wasn't just to chat, or to wish him all the best because I was becoming Catholic kind of meeting. It was a meeting in which I hoped that he would make me look like a fool for ever thinking the Catholic Church was an option. God bless the man, but as it turns out, he didn't have much to say about the Catholic Church, other than he was sure they were wrong. But many of the ideas he held were misconceptions that Catholicism for Dummies

cleared up with ease, not to mention the heavier stuff I had began to read.

Then came an interesting twist. Dr. Peter Kreeft came into my life in the strangest way. At the time of my conversion I worked in the medical wing of a local prison, and we commonly had inmates leaving and coming in from various other units. But one in particular stood out to me. He was a sickly fellow, dying of cancer and locked up for a crime he committed 40 years ago, but still just as bright eyed as ever.

When the Catholic chaplain would come around every so often, he made sure that he had no medical appointments scheduled, would go and make his confession, and then did the most beautiful thing. Getting down on both knees, on that terribly hard concrete floor, he would touch his forehead to the ground, come up, and receive the Eucharist on the tongue. It had a beauty about it that struck me, and was much more reverent and deliberate than the communion services we had at the Methodist Church.

How does this have anything to do with Dr. Kreeft, you ask? Well, when that inmate was given medical release so that he could be with his family in the last weeks of his life, he left behind a little booklet from the Knights of Columbus Catholic Information Services on “The Holy Catholic Church”, written by Dr. Kreeft as a rewording of the Catechism of the Catholic Church, and can now be found in his book “Catholic Christianity”. Dr. Kreeft had such a way with words that when I made it home that evening, I logged on to the KoC website and immediately ordered every booklet they had available, all written by Kreeft dealing with many different facets of the Catholic faith.

By this time I had finished “Catholicism for Dummies”, and while it gave a great underline of the Faith, I still had many questions left unanswered. I went to the local public library, and there they had St. Thomas Aquinas’ “Summa of the Summa” and Karl Keating’s wonderful book “What Catholics Really Believe”. I devoured Keating’s book that evening, but it ignited something within me. It stirred up questions that I had never thought of.

Why did I believe the canon of Scripture, all 66 books were divinely inspired and those others, such as Clement to Rome or the Shepherd of Hermas, weren’t? Obviously someone had to have come together and figure this sort of stuff out. Lo and behold, it was the Catholic Church who pounded out those things. It was the Catholic Church who first fought the many early heresies against the Gnostics and Arians. I saw no Baptist pastor standing up against Arius, no Anglican priest writing letters of admonition of Gnosticism and the thoughts that Christ was not God.

I finally had reached the point where a choice must be made about the hard place. I kept my feelings to myself until that Sunday when my wife and I decided to forsake the Methodist service and attended the Mass that morning, with my heart heavy. I knew this would be the life-changing day, whether I stayed with the Methodist church or swam the Tiber. As my wife and I sat in that front pew, I paid no attention to the words being spoken, and couldn’t even tell you what the homily was about or the Scripture readings that day.

But I spent the whole morning in prayer, asking for guidance and answers. For faith and fidelity to the Lord whom I wished to serve with all my heart, soul, mind, and body. At that moment I entered out of prayer, the celebrant priest was elevating the Host of the Eucharist. I swear to this day, and will hold this to be true until the

day I die or if there were a gun put to my head. The Host of the Eucharist was glowing, and the priest had an appearance of something holy.

At that moment, at the moment of elevation for consecration, I gave it all up. That evening, I formed my letter of resignation to the United Methodist Church, expressing concerns over political matters, morality, and most importantly, the forsaking of both ecclesial and secular history. I told my wife that I would be converting, and she expressed joy but also concern that I would be doing it for her and not on my own accord. I believe the toughest was telling my UM pastor, who had become a dear and great friend, that I would be entering into the Catholic Church and walking away from my walk into ordained ministry. But I knew it had to be done if I were to walk in the fullness of the Faith.

As I informed family and friends of my decision, especially the Christian 12 step program I was assisting in, I received both positive and negative reactions. I remember telling one friend who immediately blurted out “Why would you want to join up with a bunch of pedophiles?!”, which struck me as somewhat odd. Here was a man who was not looking for Truth, but rather something close to it that fit what he wanted to believe. I called the parish my wife and I had been attending and inquired about RCIA, and was told it was lead by the pastor, of whom I had met many times in the confines of the prison walls I worked. I attended that Wednesday and immediately felt at home.

I met with Father Stephen in private to assess the knowledge I had of the Catholic faith to see if I would be allowed to receive the Sacrament of Confirmation, or if I would need to complete the next round. To this day, I still chuckle when we spoke over coffee of how completely off track we wound up, discussing the forgotten impact of C.S. Lewis, G.K. Chesterton and Hillaire Belloc. In the

end, after several hours, he made the decision to pass on the recommendation of Confirmation to Cardinal DiNardo, the Archbishop of the Archdiocese of Galveston-Houston. I was received into the Catholic Church Easter Sunday 2009.

These days my wife and I have two wonderful boys, and still attend the parish in which I was instructed and confirmed. I actively participate in the RCIA program sharing my conversion story, answering questions, and acting as a somewhat “proxy” sponsor for catechumens and candidates wishing to enter into the Church. But my love, oh, my greatest love, is acting as a catechist for my 11th and 12th grade students who are reaching the ages where faith becomes tough.

Questions are so many and it seems as though there are few answers. It is heart warming and ever so gratifying to see my students open up in joy when they learn more and more of their faith and find that just because they have questions, it doesn't mean there aren't answers. Currently, I'm doing my best to live out the vocation that God has made for me, to be a husband and father. I'm still discerning the diaconate for the Catholic Church, and have several more years before I can enter to really know if that's the direction God is calling me. But until then, I'm happier than I've ever been.

In the end, philosophy brought me from atheism to theism, theology brought me into the United Methodist Church, and history brought me home.