

A Southern Baptist Liberty University alumni becomes Catholic

Every spiritual life is a journey. Mine began in Warner Robins, Georgia in 1971. I was born into a good Methodist family and had a strong Christian foundation laid for me in childhood. But unfortunately, as is all too common, during my teenage years I drifted away somewhat from this good foundation and was lukewarm at best towards Christianity. I still attended weekly church services and youth group activities, but my interests were mainly in having fun with my friends and having a spiritual life was far from my mind.

But at age 17, I had a profound conversion experience that impressed upon me the reality and urgency of Christianity. I gave my heart and life to Jesus and experienced a great sense of meaning and purpose in life. Around this time, my family and I became Southern Baptists, which matched well with my new fervency and devotion.

I ended up going off to college to Jerry Falwell's well-known Liberty University in Lynchburg, Virginia, which proved to be an ideal place for me at the time to deepen my devotion and learn more about the Faith. It was a great time of spiritual development for me, and by the time I graduated in 1995, I felt energized and excited about where Our Lord would lead me and what He would do through me.

However, with the external support and security of a self-contained Christian environment taken away from me, and being thrust out into "the real world," I found myself depressed, lonely and struggling to find my place. I had moved back to Georgia, but I could not find a church where I truly felt at home. The usual format of singing a few praise and worship songs and listening to a preacher for 30 to 40 minutes no longer fulfilled my spiritual hunger as it had before. Even my own private devotions of Bible reading and prayer also left me feeling empty. Talking with God became more and more of a struggle and trying to maintain that prior tangible sense of fervent devotion became an oppressive burden. It was a crisis moment in my life.

I was not aware of it at the time, because it was not a teaching that I ever came across in my Protestant circles, but what I was going through is a common stage in spiritual development and growth: After an initial period of zeal and sensible delight in the spiritual life, a period of dryness and seeming darkness is passed through as Our Lord draws souls closer to Him and away from self-seeking in pleasurable spiritual consolations. He leads them through this to teach them to rely more on faith alone, and not on good feelings.

But I knew none of this at the time. I only felt like my Christianity was dismantling around me and that there was nothing I could do about it. My strength was as sand and I felt lost in barren darkness. No matter what I did, I could not find those familiar sensible

indicators that I was close to God. He seemed very distant, even absent, and my cries out to Him seemed to be ignored.

New light did finally come to me after many months, oddly enough, through the writings of some medieval Catholics such as St. John of the Cross and St. Teresa of Avila. St. John's "Dark Night of the Soul" and St. Teresa's "Interior Castle," provided me with new spiritual insights and made some sense of what I was going through; they gave me hope. Their writings also ignited in me a strange new sweetness of intimacy with Our Lord that was quite unlike anything I had experienced before: profound and deep, but simple, quiet, peaceful.

I discovered that a relationship with God was not always a matter of me thinking about what to say in prayer, or even in always studying Biblical texts for some applicable truths. Those laudable activities are only the means to reach the ultimate goal, which is a real loving experience with the living God. I learned about something called "contemplation," which was the name given to the simple serene loving intimacy with God that my soul had been craving but had been fighting against in trying to regain some past sensible devotion that I felt I had lost.

I began to embrace this new quietude and sweetness, but after a few months I was again plunged into a deep darkness of spirit, which frightened me greatly. A depressing weight seemed to descend upon me. I felt like I was suffocating and I was desperate to get out from under it. I felt like perhaps moving away from my hometown would be the sort of stimulating change of setting that I needed to expand my horizons and renew my outlook on life.

My foray into the wide world took me initially to New England. One night, I stayed at a Benedictine retreat house in Still River, Massachusetts. I still considered myself firmly Protestant despite the fact that my reading material was at that time mostly written by medieval Catholic saints. I also felt drawn to monastic settings for some reason, and had a handful of retreat houses picked out prior to my trip that were close to where I would be traveling.

At St. Benedict Abbey, after a friendly dinnertime debate with some of the monks about Catholic beliefs, a fellow guest gave me a copy of "Born Fundamentalist, Born Again Catholic" by David Currie. She said that she would be praying that I would one day become Catholic. I thought to myself that she could pray all she wants, but I would never become Catholic. I tucked the book into my things and moved on the next morning.

I eventually settled in Louisville, Kentucky where I had friends from college. Over the months that followed, I continued to try to find a Protestant church to suit me, but I was unable to do so. I knew that I needed more than what I was being offered in the typical Baptist service. Occasionally, in my private time of prayer, I would still enter into

moments of that certain deep contemplative peace, but I found upon entering a Baptist church service I would be pulled into something much more superficial, with all the songs and preaching and giddy exuberance. I recall on one occasion, I managed through the songs at the beginning of the service, trying unsuccessfully to get into the spirit of the singing, but when we sat down and the pastor got up to preach, I felt compelled to get up and bolt out of the door, which is exactly what I did. I decided that I could not sit there like that anymore and listen to another lengthy talk.

Christian worship had to be more than that. But where would I go? I had experienced in years past the extremes of Pentecostalism and I knew that I did not want that. On the other side, the more “reverent” liturgical churches seemed to have, in recent decades, softened into a shapeless liberalism, so I steered clear of them as well. I looked objectively at all the different types of Christian groups, and I began to be very disenchanted with the fractured nature of Protestantism: So many competing groups, all claiming to be following the same Jesus and reading the same Bible. If the Bible was the authority, why did all these Christians disagree on so much regarding doctrine and practice?

I read more on the histories of various denominations and competing theologies and, in the process, my eyes were opened to the fundamental fallacy of the doctrine of Sola Scriptura, that the Bible alone is the sole authority for Christian belief. As I later discovered, this issue was the turning point for so many who end up becoming Catholic: *The teaching that all Christian teachings must be taught in the Bible is not itself taught in the Bible.*

When the paradoxical truth of that statement settled into my heart and mind, I realized that I could not remain Protestant anymore. Protestantism was illogical at its very foundation. However, although I could not remain Protestant, I also felt that I could not become Catholic either, since I still felt that with doctrines like Transubstantiation, “worshipping” Mary, praying to saints, the infallibility of the Pope, Purgatory etc. it was a gravely misled religion.

I spent many months in this odd limbo of being between worlds and with the frustrated feeling that I was at an impasse. After wrestling with it from all angles, I decided to “just live” and not drive myself crazy over it. At least I still believed in Jesus, even though He seemed so distant to me. He was real to me by faith and I would trust Him to sort all these things out for me in time. Since I did not know which group to associate with, I actually stopped going to church services for a while, but I did not stop reading the Bible and trying to pray. Praying, at least with words, was like trying to swim upstream, but I tried not to worry too much about it. I eventually gave up trying to pray words at all and would just allot a certain portion of time each day to kneel quietly before Our Lord.

I began making weekly day-trips to the nearby Abbey of Gethsemane in Bardstown, Kentucky (where Thomas Merton had lived) for more intense quiet time with God. These peaceful retreats were the most nourishing times to me during this period, and it was the closest that I felt to a spiritual home. I would often attend Compline, or Night Prayer, in the chapel. Being there with the monks chanting the Psalms was a very peaceful and prayerful experience and it caused my spirit to truly soar. There was a strong sense that my seeking after God had brought me there, and it matched so well with the longing of my spirit. I ceased to try to make everything fit together and make sense. I could gain nourishment from these Catholic resources and places without actually being Catholic. Besides, I was not Protestant anymore. I was not sure exactly what I was except a follower of Jesus, but I was neither a Protestant nor a Catholic. It was a strange time.

My apartment in Louisville was very close to Holy Spirit Catholic Church. I passed by it daily. As an act of reaching out for more avenues of spiritual nourishment, I decided to attend Mass one Sunday evening. I sat there alone, spiritually burdened, exhausted. But here was something new: A worship service that matched my current spiritual climate and answered that unnamed longing. Music and singing there were, but it was peaceful, worshipful, reverent, with a subdued and beautiful joy. There were non-embellished prayers and readings from Scripture, followed by a mini-sermon that touched on a couple good points and then was mercifully over.

This was followed by the Eucharist, and I was prepared then to endure through some strangeness, some glaring vestiges of ancient pagan rituals. However, I was pleasantly surprised: The Eucharistic prayers sounded scriptural, very Christ-centered, and quite rich and meaningful. There was no strangeness, no invoking of pagan deities. The priest, in normal language, was expounding on the Sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the Cross, which I wholeheartedly believed in.

Above the altar in that particular church, there was a life-size, very life-like statue of Jesus hanging on the cross. I found myself gazing up throughout Mass at His outstretched arms. He seemed to be reaching out to embrace me, to draw me close to Him, there in that place. I did not quite understand everything, but I knew that I would return the following week.

I started to feel very much at home there at Mass. I still felt strongly that many of the underlying doctrines of the Catholic Church were wrong, but I was finding nourishment there, and as I had not found it elsewhere, I continued to come to Mass. I felt confident that I could glean spiritual nourishment by coming there and still not become Catholic.

Eventually, I was moved to begin reading “Born Fundamentalist, Born Again Catholic,” which had been given to me so many months before at St. Benedict Abbey.

The book actually made me angry the first time through, as the author seemed to me to be somewhat arrogant in his absolute certainty of the truths of the Catholic Faith. How could he be so sure? I continued to make the weekly trips to the Abbey of Gethsemane. I read the book again. I read the writings of the Early Church. I came quietly kneeling before Our Lord daily, like a mute beggar.

Then, through continued prayer, reading, study, and attending Mass, a great miracle took place. Nothing else except a miracle could explain the melting away of so many barriers and long-held misconceptions I had about the Catholic Faith. The first doctrine I accepted was that of the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist. I saw then those scriptures like the 6th Chapter of the Gospel of St. John in which Jesus speaks so clearly of the necessity of eating His Body and drinking His Blood. This was confirmed to me by the Early Church writings I was reading that spoke of the Eucharist in ways consistent with the Catholic teaching. The Lord's Supper in the Baptist always seemed to be a bit lacking to me, and now I saw that it did not match up with either scripture or Early Church practice.

Papal authority and apostolic succession came early on and filled for me the authority gap that Protestants had unsuccessfully sought to fill with Sola Scriptura. Again I found confirmation in the Early Church writings of the authoritative role of the successors of the Apostles and that of the local bishops. After the authority question was settled, the other "problem" doctrines fell into place: Purgatory, Mary and the Saints, Indulgences and so on. Catholic doctrines and practices are so beautifully woven together that once someone begins to accept some of the Church's teachings, the entire theological system eventually falls into place.

And so, on the 18th of February, 1999, after joining the RCIA program at Holy Spirit parish, at long last I was received into full communion with the Catholic Church. Words cannot express the fire that Christ ignited in me through union with His One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church, truly a Treasure of Treasures. I could go on for pages and pages about the Eucharist alone, as well as the Blessed Virgin Mary, the Communion of Saints, the Rosary, the Divine Office, the feasts and liturgical cycle of seasons, the myriad of precious devotions, the vast 2000 years of Christ's Church on earth, and the increased love for Our Lord that He has instilled within me!

New vistas and vast oceans of boundless and unspeakable riches have opened up before my eyes as the clear and brilliant light of Truth - O Glorious Truth! - unmuddled, unchanging, shines brightly in the bosom of Holy Mother Church, in the Bride and Body of Christ dispersed yet One throughout the whole earth! I knew Jesus Christ before, yes, but the crumbs and morsels of Him that I tasted and cherished before, I now find laid out in fullness before me upon the richest and most glorious Banquet Table - the Catholic Church! Praised be God Forever!

You can read a more detailed episodic account of my journey at my blog: <http://catholicsojourner.blogspot.com>

May God bless you in your own journey.
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