

Receiving Christ:  
*A Brief Account of my Life-Long Journey into the Fullness of Christ's Body*



*The Resurrection of the Lord depicted in Stained Glass  
Sacred Heart Catholic Church in Danville, Virginia*

Joshua D. Johnson  
February 2008  
Danville, Virginia

### Introduced to Jesus

Tenderly, yet with all the seriousness of eternity in view, my mother asked: “Josh, do you want to ask Jesus to come into your heart?” I pondered shortly and answered “five more days.” “Sure,” I thought, “Asking Jesus into my heart would get me into heaven and save me from hell, but why rush it?” After all, I was only five years old, (thus my fascination with the number five) and felt no urgency in the matter. Eventually, after a few cycles of “five more days,” I entered my parent’s bedroom and told them I was ready to ask Jesus to come into my heart. About a year later, I found myself in a room telling the deacons what my Sunday School teachers and parents had taught me: “I am saved because I asked Jesus to forgive me of my sins and come into my heart.” Apparently, I was rather convincing, because just a few weeks later I stood in front of a hundred or so faith filled people, told them what I had done with my parents about a year earlier, and was baptized in the “In the Name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.” I even have the pictures to prove it! I was told that by being baptized I was obeying Christ. This was true, but it was not for nearly a decade and a half later I realized my Baptism was so much more: it was the sealing of my conversion, the re-birth by “water and the Spirit” that Jesus told Nicodemus about in the Gospel of John. What ensued in the years in between was a profound struggle with what St. Augustine called “concupiscence.” My sins were washed and I received the Holy Spirit, but eventually I responded less and less to that Spirit. Inevitably, the fire within my heart slowly dissipated. It was not that I wanted Jesus out of my heart, I wanted him in, but I also wanted to have fun like my friends were.



*Giving my testimony before receiving the sacrament of Baptism*

### Good Intentions without the Will and Sacramental Grace

As I entered my teen years, I prayed the “prayer of salvation” hundreds of times and “re-dedicated” my life at least a dozen times. I can recall one such time when I was so moved that I prostrated myself on the ground and re-dedicated my life to God. A revival preacher had come into town to preach at my high school. I had attended this Christian school for most of my life, but as I neared high school, I felt lonely. I wanted to be liked and discovered acceptance with my peers in our mutual rebellion. I got into a lot of trouble and constantly pushed the edges. But that week I decided to change my ways, and at the end of the week, I found myself standing with a microphone in front of the entire high school. I had volunteered to share my decision with my friends in a chapel service and I did so with much fervor. I remember saying: “Let’s imagine that the space of this gymnasium represents the time of eternity. If all these thousands of cubic feet represent eternity, then the tip of the point of this pen, which is less than a square millimeter, would still be too small to represent the time of our lives here on earth. You see, in view of eternity, it makes no sense for us to live for ourselves; that is why I am dedicating my life to Christ.” This was to be my first experience in preaching, and I delivered this message with every ounce of my being. My friends mockingly predicted it was “just a phase.” Sadly, they were right. In spite of my intentions, I lacked the will and sacramental grace to truly practice what I had preached. As I edged closer to adulthood, success in the political world inflated my ego and helped me erect a façade of who I was to the world. I began to see people as objects that could be used for an end and became rather talented at getting what I wanted. In the back of my mind, I

thought, “Well it’s once saved, always saved, so why not just do what I want?” Yet there was something in my heart that told me this philosophy was lacking in truth.



*I devoted most of my teenage and college years to politics. Pictured here with former Senator Rick Santorum*

### Becoming Methodists

I went off to college at Liberty University and, in my second semester I began dating a beautiful girl named Katie. Two and half years later, she would become my wife. The school attempted to enforce sexual purity, but my inquisitive mind was unimpressed by the “because the Bible says so” approach that failed to delve deeper into the transformative biblical truths that we would later discover in Pope John Paul’s *Theology of the Body*. We were to discover this gold mine of truth later, but at the time we sought answers in a more progressive and intellectual Christianity. Through a friend, we were introduced into a local United Methodist Church. It was there we began to experience a love we had never felt in church. The people “took us in” as their own children and before long we discovered God’s love in something

they called the “sacraments.” Here it was not just “Communion,” it was “*Holy Communion*.” This was something we never experienced growing up, but here it was something to be treasured: all came forth to kneel and receive the bread and juice.

I was instantly hooked and wanted more. We didn’t completely understand it, but we believed Christ was somehow present in this “means of grace.”

### Catholics Really are Christians

After two years of college, I ambitiously accepted an offer to work for an upstart political fundraising firm in Washington, DC. Through the firm’s work in the pro-life movement, I met several faithful Catholics. Through their witness, I began to develop an interest in the Catholic faith and soon found myself entering a Catholic Church for the first time: it was surreal; with art depicting the Christian story as far as the eye could see. I looked above me and saw the words painted on the dome: “I am the way the Truth and the Life.” It finally hit me: “These people really do believe. They really are Christians!” After this visit I discovered Catholic churches to be shelters of peace where I could find relief from my own sin and the sin that pervaded the political world in which I was so entrenched.

### Called to Ministry

After Katie finished her degree at Liberty, we were married and set out on our new life together. I soon became dissatisfied with my Washington career and resolved to find another career. One night I felt a voice asking me: “What about ministry?” After much tossing, turning and internal arguing I said “yes” and spent the next few months trying to figure out what that would mean for our future. I soon decided that my gifts were well suited to pastoral ministry, and began to pursue this new goal with much eagerness, an eagerness my new bride did not share. Despite this, she was graciously supportive



and at the age of 22, I became a “student pastor,” serving two rural churches while attending Duke Divinity School.

### Discovering the big “C” Catholic Church

When I entered seminary at Duke, I was immersed in scripture and Church History. I discovered the early Church from the letters of St. Ignatius (early 2<sup>nd</sup> century), St. Justin Martyr (mid 2<sup>nd</sup> century) and St. Irenaeus (late 2<sup>nd</sup> century). I discovered that this early Church staunchly believed in a big “C” Catholic Church, that is, one with a visible and tangible unity with the Apostles and their successors, and especially with the Successor of Peter. I discovered that the sacraments were the center point of life for this early Church. From its earliest times they believed that the bread and wine of the Eucharist were truly Christ’s body and blood that brought life to those who partook. They understood the consecrated bread and wine to be the



*Duke Chapel*

once offered flesh and blood of the resurrected Lord that was perpetually re-presented in the Eucharist. From a very early time, it was understood as a Holy Sacrifice that was offered for the whole Church. I was so excited about my discoveries that I wanted to bring Christ’s Eucharistic life to my own parishes.

### Trouble on the Home-Front

I served two parishes; one quickly embraced my enthusiasm, but the other parish quietly suspected I was trying to bring Roman Catholicism into their small country church. One evening, a lady asked me, “How can the bread and juice be Jesus’ body and blood?” I replied adapting an example our professor had given: “When I get older, my hair will turn grey. My hair is an “appearance” and as I get older, my appearances will change but I will still be Josh Johnson: that is, who I *really* am will be the same even though my appearance has changed. But just the opposite happens in the Eucharist, the bread and juice retain their appearances, still tasting and smelling like bread and juice, but what they really are has been changed into the body and blood of Christ.”

In my brief pastorate, I had taught and preached that Jesus meant it when he said: “this is my body, given for you” (Luke 22:19, NRSV) and that “unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you” (John 6:53). As I studied Church history that fall, I was amazed to discover that through the first millennium of Christianity, no Trinitarian Christian ever questioned Christ’s sacrificial presence in the Eucharist. So why were these good people rejecting such a vital part of the Christian faith? One dear lady told me: “Preacher, we’ve always believed it’s just symbolic.” Strangely, I later discovered she was right. While the Holy Spirit’s presence was certainly in that church, I was not a priest, and no matter how much I desired, I was not able to give them the heavenly gifts of Christ’s body and blood.

### The Music Drew Me...

While the theology of my parish was turning out to be rocky, our marriage was even rockier. I was failing miserably to love my wife as Christ loved the Church. In the midst of our struggles, I found comfort in the deep wisdom of the Church and its scriptures. I spent countless hours reading all writings of the Church Fathers we were assigned and then some. One night, as I was

studying in the basement of Duke Chapel, I heard the most beautiful music coming from above. It sounded like heaven. As I climbed the stairs, it was indeed heaven on earth: it was Holy Mass! That evening, the time tested truth of scripture and tradition unfolded beautifully right before my eyes. This evening was the Rite of Acceptance and as the candidates went forward with their sponsors, I found myself thinking, "I want to be up there, I want to be Catholic!"



*Fr. Charles Breindel<sup>1</sup>*

Yet soon after I discounted this feeling; I saw no reason for abandoning the truth that was handed down by the apostles, but I thought that I might find something in my Reformation era Church History class that would show me where the truth had become corrupted. Think again! I spent long nights comparing the Catholic beliefs to the beliefs of the Reformers and found that it was the Catholics whose doctrine was grounded soundly in the teachings of the early Church and their interpretation of Scripture, while the Reformers relegated the wisdom of early Church to second place, insisting on this new idea that salvation is by faith *alone* and the Bible *alone* is the sole rule of authority, despite the fact that these two tenants were contradicted by the scriptures themselves. My heart grew heavier, but I put off seriously considering becoming Catholic because I knew it would cost me dearly.

### Can We Really Do This?

Shortly after my second semester, my dear grandfather's impending death brought me to Texas several times. In the midst of sorrowful circumstances, I got the opportunity to visit with some of my extended family, a few of whom were Catholic. During dinner one night, I became deeply immersed in a conversation on the seven sacraments with my second cousin. At the end of the evening she gave me Scott and Kimberly Hahn's *Rome Sweet Home* to read. Although I told her I was going to put off reading it until "I read some other books," I had scarcely left Texas before I gave in. I was deeply touched by the Hahns' story. As I was driving back from the airport, I felt an immense conviction to become Catholic. When I got home, I gave the book to my wife, who also read it in a day. It was then we began to ask the question, "If the Roman Catholic Church is the fullness of that one Church Jesus founded, why are we not a part of it?"



*Left to Right: Brennan Peterson, Josh Johnson, Katie Johnson and Diane Peterson. Diane is Josh's second cousin from San Antonio, who gave him the book "Rome Sweet Home." She and her husband came all the way from San Antonio to serve as our confirmation sponsors.*

### The Healing Power of Christ's Presence

We soon began attending Saturday evening Mass together and it was there we discovered the love and presence of Jesus in a way we had never felt before. Together, we desired to receive Christ's flesh and blood into our own bodies. We wanted Jesus to become a part of us and our marriage. When the Host was elevated, we stood in awe at the presence of our Lord. Here was the Holy Sacrifice, right in front of our eyes! Here was the victim and the eternal high priest! Here was the "Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world." Our eyes welled up with tears as goose bumps appeared on our arms. Deep inside, we felt something we had scarcely felt before. Deep inside, we knew this was where God wanted us.

Deep inside, there was a peace that passes all understanding. We experienced this together holding hands, as husband and wife. We had never been so spiritually bonded together.

### Receiving Christ in His Fullness

The more we attended Mass, the more my heart ached. I didn't want to leave the congregations I loved, and knew I'd lose my job, the parsonage and my Methodist scholarships to Duke. Yet every day God's call grew stronger and so finally, I obeyed. A week later, Katie made the same decision. Although we faced opposition from some beloved family members, we were blessed with the loving pastoral guidance of our new spiritual father, Fr. Charles Breindel, the support of many friends and even a response of love and understanding from the congregations I served. On December 9, 2007, I preached my last sermon as a Methodist and on December 15, 2007, the 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday in Advent, our joy was made complete as we proclaimed our faith and received the sacred flesh and precious blood of our Lord at Sacred Heart Church in Danville, Virginia. Since deciding to enter the fullness of Christ's Church, the Sacred Heart of Jesus in the Eucharist has given us the power to melt away the concupiscence that so plagued our lives. Our lives together have become truly sacramental, for what we were missing we are now receiving in abundance: the self giving love of the bridegroom which is perpetually offered in Christ's "one holy Catholic and Apostolic Church."

*I am currently completing my Divinity Degree at Duke University and working part time at Sacred Heart Catholic Church in Danville, Virginia. Katie and I ask your prayers for their continuing growth, guidance and their Catholic witness, especially in light of the difficulties our conversion has caused with Protestant family members.*



*Our journey has been blessed with many friends. We are pictured here with our friends that attended our Confirmation Mass that include Methodist and Anglican friends from Duke, friends from Sacred Heart Church and friends from Ft Hill UMC in Lynchburg, the church that lovingly "took us in" while were in college. Notice Fr. Charles' rose chasuble, worn on the 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Advent because it is the Sunday of joy!*

---

<sup>1</sup> Picture taken from the cover of Father Breindel's book: *Born in Beirut: A Priesthood*. In this collection of homilies, Father Breindel shares his call to priesthood, which began during his captivity Beirut, Lebanon in 1982. Books can be ordered from Sacred Heart Catholic Church by calling (434) 792-9456. All funds benefit the Catholic School Tuition Fund at Sacred Heart Catholic School.