

Romeward Bound:
An Apology for Why I Am Converting To Catholicism
By Jeffery W. Moore

Let me begin by saying that this is the most well informed decision I have made in my entire life. If you were to ask my friends, especially those from seminary, they would more than likely say that I tend to have a reactionary personality: that I do or say things, at times, without first thinking about it. But for this most important decision that my family and I are making I can honestly say that that is not the case. As you all may know by now the decision I am speaking of is the decision to become Roman Catholic.

Now immediately some of you may be thinking: why? Why am I leaving the Episcopal Church when I have only just begun? I am so young and full of promise why would I want to leave the church that I have just started to minister in? These and others are legitimate questions and I will now proceed to explain why it is that I have renounced my ordination vows in the Episcopal Church so that I can join the Catholic Church.

While recently reflecting on all that I have been through in the past year I have realized that there are three main sections that my conversion can be divided into and they are: theological, rational, and mystical. We will be touching on these three points as I attempt to take you through a chronological explanation of the events of the past year.

In his autobiography *Surprised by Joy* C.S. Lewis wrote, "Really, a young Atheist cannot guard his faith too carefully. Dangers lie in wait for him on every side." He said this in regards to his own conversion to Christianity, because with the friends he kept and the books he read it was only a matter of time until he converted. I have taken this quote as my own motto but have slightly modified it. For me the quote would state, "Really, a young *Anglo-Catholic* cannot guard his faith too carefully. Dangers lie in wait for him on every side." I have taken this as my motto because through my discussions with friends and the books I have read I have become convinced that I must convert to Roman Catholicism.

One person who has helped me make this decision is Dr. Thomas Howard. Some of you may be familiar with him. For those of you who do not know him he is a Roman Catholic author who has written several books about the Christian faith and apologetics. I met Dr. Howard on March 15th of last year at a CCU meeting and I was fortunate enough to sit by him during lunch at that meeting. It was there that I found out that he has a deep love for C.S. Lewis just like myself. And so we spent our lunchtime talking about Lewis and the Christian faith. As normal as it may seem to simply have lunch with someone, this particular lunch turned out to be a very momentous occasion in my own life. The reason I say this is because it was after meeting him that I was told that he was an author of several books. In fact, one book that I had recently purchased before meeting Dr. Howard was *C.S. Lewis and the Catholic Church* by Joseph Pearce. I did not realize at the time that I purchased the book that Dr. Howard had in fact written the Forward to that book. After discovering this I quickly read the entire book. Next, I read Dr. Howard's book *Evangelical Is Not Enough*. These two books had a profound impact upon me.

In an email to Dr. Howard dated March 29, 2005 I wrote to him in regards to Pearce's book and said, "In the last chapter Pearce asks this question, '...where would Lewis stand in relation to the Anglican church were he alive today?'" My own answer to Dr. Howard on this question was, "Personally, I believe that the answer to this question is that Lewis would in fact go to Rome. The reason I believe this can be expressed in Pearce's own words, 'The sobering truth is that even if Lewis had not chosen to leave the Church of England, the Church of England has chosen to leave him.'" I went on to say,

When you look at the state of affairs in the Anglican Church it does indeed appear that it has left behind the historic faith that Lewis defended in his belief of mere Christianity... And for myself, if I were not under a faithful bishop like Jack Iker in a faithful diocese like Fort Worth, after having read Pearce's book, I would almost certainly convert to Roman Catholicism. But I keep wondering if that is enough, is it enough that I belong to a faithful diocese when the rest of the province of America has apostatized. Is it enough to be a 'Fort Worth Episcopalian' when other dioceses have bishops, priests, deacons and laity who say the Creed without believing 'that which has been believed everywhere, always, and by all.' I truly believe that, were he alive today, Lewis would go to Rome. Therefore I wonder – what is holding me back. I am at a loss.

In his response to my email Dr. Howard wrote, "There is no question that if CSL were still on earth, he'd be obliged to abandon the poor C. of E., and of course there's nowhere to go but Rome." So you can see that by this point last year I was in a dilemma. I had just read two books that were very convincing arguments for becoming Catholic and I also had a C.S. Lewis scholar agreeing with me that if Lewis were still alive today he would become Catholic. And that last point is no small thing because Lewis has been a big influence in my life. You might even say that he is a big reason that I became an Anglican. So to be at a point where I thought he might convert, were he alive today, I had to really access the reasons that I would remain Episcopalian. So this is where I was a year ago, with questions in my mind that would not go away and that I could not ignore.

As you may remember, it was just a few days after I wrote this email to Dr. Howard that Pope John Paul II died on April 2, 2005. This was of course a sad day not only for Catholics around the world but for all Christians and even for people of other faiths. Just a few days ago my wife, Ellie, said to me, "Jeff, I'm afraid that it might be my fault that we are going through all this right now." She was speaking of our conversion to Catholicism. Then she said, "It was last year when John Paul died and during his funeral that I prayed that I was still Catholic." (And as you may or may not know my wife was raised in the Catholic Church.) I could not help being very touched by these words and I have to admit that I had similar feelings to hers at that point. And yet at the time we had not discussed leaving for Rome. And why would we have discussed it? By that time we had been at St. Vincent's for less than a year (which is the parish I have served at as a curate right out of seminary) and I had only been a priest for six months. Not to mention the fact that we had spent the last six years and a good deal of money in discerning my call to the priesthood for three years and then surviving seminary for three years. Were we not now entitled to the comfort of having a steady, good-paying job for me and a good life for my family? What in the world was God calling for us to do now?

In the next month or so I believe was the first time that I approached Ellie about having questions of staying in the Episcopal Church. She did not really want to discuss leaving at that time. Like I just said,

we had just spent three long cold winters at seminary in Wisconsin and she was ready to be comfortable for a while. But still, the question of what should I do kept nagging at my conscience and I knew that to ignore it would be a very bad thing. This is the point at which something truly profound happened. As a priest you are able, and in fact expected, to spend much time reflecting on the Scriptures. It was during one of these times of reflection, when I was preparing for a weekday Mass, that I had a sudden revelation while thinking about the Gospel lesson.

On Thursday, May 12, 2005, the Gospel lesson was from St. John 17:20-26. It is there that Jesus is praying to the Father and says, "...that they may all be one; even as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that thou hast sent me." After reading this I felt that the wind had been knocked out of me. When I read this I realized that Christ really wants His Church, which is His Bride, to be one just as He and the Father are one. It occurred to me at that moment that the way in which Father and Son are one is an organic unity. There is no and can be no division or disagreement in the Godhead – the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are a perfect unity. I then saw that in all Protestant bodies this oneness is *not* exhibited. I started to feel called to that oneness that Christ Himself prayed for and I also started actively seeking it out.

It was my hope at this time that, due to the election of Pope Benedict XVI, there might at some point in the near future be an Anglican Uniate Rite formed within the Catholic Church. This I thought and still believe would be the best of both worlds for Anglo-Catholics: we would get to retain our beautiful liturgy and at the same time have the benefit of Papal Authority. It was then, at some point between May and June of last year that I made a deal with myself. I promised myself that if there were not some kind of reunion of Anglicans with Rome in the next five years then I would leave for Rome by myself.

It was after I made this promise to myself that I contacted Fr. Allan Hawkins at St. Mary the Virgin Catholic Church in Arlington, TX. I had heard from other priests in the diocese that he was one of *those* priests that had converted through the Pastoral Provision from the Episcopal Church to the Catholic Church. Thinking back on the day that I called him I remember having some trepidation about making the call. I truly believe though that it was Divine Providence that made me dial the number. He was very eager to meet with me and we made an appointment for later that week. On the day of our meeting, while I was on my way to his office in Arlington, I kept wondering to myself, "What in the world am I getting myself into? Why am I going down to talk with this guy?" I kept telling myself that I was just going to see why he left for Rome. I wanted to know why he had become Catholic and if his reasons were at all similar to my desire for reunion with Rome.

We had a very good discussion that day. He told me the reasons why he and his parish had become Catholic and I found myself agreeing with everything he said. Not least of the reasons he left was because of a desire for the unity of the Church that he felt was missing in the Anglican Communion. In fact, when discussing this point he mentioned the text from St. John 17:20-26. This is same text that had had such a profound effect on me just a week or two prior to my meeting Fr. Hawkins. Needless to say this was an amazing moment for me and I knew that it was not just coincidence that I had come to see him. Upon leaving his office he gave me a gift. It was a Rosary that had been blessed by Pope John Paul II. I was speechless and must tell you that next to the gift of children that my wife has given me, this was the nicest gift I had ever received.

During my time at Nashotah House I had become acquainted with praying the Rosary, especially during my last year when I prayed the Rosary almost daily. But when we moved back to Texas after graduation I fell out of the habit of praying the Rosary. That was until the day I received the Rosary from Fr. Hawkins. For almost a year now I have been praying, on an almost daily basis, with that Rosary that he gave to me and it has had a deep impact on my decision to become Catholic. It is at this point that we enter into the mystical side of my journey to Rome.

One day, after I had been praying the Rosary for a few weeks, I was in the chapel at St. Vincent's meditating on the icon of the Virgin Mary and Infant Jesus. It was at that time that I had the distinct impression that Mary was saying to me, "When are you coming home?" Nothing like this had ever happened to me before but it was so real that I thought I could almost actually hear it. Some people may want to discount this as mere nonsense but I can tell you that it had a profound effect on me and it is something that I will *never* forget. I truly believe that Mary was speaking to me that day. And when she said those words, "When are you coming home?" I knew exactly what she meant. She meant when was I going to come home and join her, her Son and the rest of her family in the Catholic Church. I understood then what it means for Mary to be called the mother of the Church. I was her wayward son and she was calling me to come home.

Soon after this something else happened which I feel validates what Mary said to me. A few weeks after my first Marian encounter I had another experience. While I was sleeping one night I had the most real dream that I have ever had. Now to put this in its proper context I want you to know that I usually do not remember my dreams and when I do remember them they usually quickly disappear from my memory, but not this one. This dream was vivid and I will never forget it. In it I saw the Virgin Mary nursing the infant Jesus and as I was watching Mother and Child I realized that it was not just the infant Jesus that she was nursing. The infant was in fact the Church. For what it is worth this is my own interpretation of the dream. As you know the Church is often referred to as the Body of Christ. So with that in mind I was sure that the dream meant that Mary takes care of the Church just as she took care of Jesus when he was a child. She is to us a Mother. When I shared this vision with a Roman Catholic friend I was told that this was a common depiction of Mary and Jesus in the Middle Ages. And what is odd is that I do not ever remember having heard about this depiction of Jesus and Mary before I had this vision.

I know that some of you may be uncomfortable with this mystical side of things, as I once was, so we will now leave this behind and continue on my journey to Rome. Only let me say that these two experiences have had a profound effect on me and are a big reason for my becoming Catholic.

Because I had enjoyed my talk with Fr. Hawkins so much I decided that I wanted to go and meet another Roman priest who had 'swum the Tiber'. I called Fr. Gremmels who is the pastor at St. Elizabeth's in Keller and he, like Fr. Hawkins, was very eager to speak with me. When I went to talk with him I told him about the promise that I had made to myself: if there was no Anglican Uniate Rite in the Catholic Church within the next five years then I would leave for Rome myself. But he said to me something that Fr. Hawkins had not said. He told me, "Don't wait; leave now!" Well, needless to say I was speechless when he said this. I didn't even know what to think. I left that meeting with more questions than I started with; I started wondering to myself why didn't I leave sooner rather than later.

This was yet another providential day in a long list of providential days I have had in the past year. I say it was providential because I truly believe that God was working through that meeting with Fr. Gremmels. If he had not told me to “leave now” on that day I probably would not be here right now telling you why I am becoming Roman Catholic. I would probably still be in the process of waiting for five years before I did anything. But please don’t misunderstand me when I tell you this. I did not decide to leave the Episcopal Church earlier than I had planned just because he told me too. Instead, when he told me to “leave now” it made me start to really think about why should I stay and why shouldn’t I leave.

So far I have said much in description of the *events* that have led to my decision to convert to Catholicism but I have said little about my theological reasons for doing so. But after that meeting with Fr. Gremmels the theological reasons come in to play. Up to this point I was not planning on leaving for another five years therefore I felt I did not have to wrestle with the reasons for leaving or staying, but now I could not ignore the questions I was facing. During this time, which would have been late spring of last year I came to the following conclusions.

Conclusion #1 – the Pope, who is the Bishop of Rome, is indeed the head of the Church on earth. When considering becoming a Roman Catholic the first thing that most people would obviously take into consideration would be the Pope. I realized that people who have a high view of the Pope are almost always Catholic. The reason for this I believe is that there is an explicit dislike for the Papacy within all Protestant bodies which I believe is a lingering effect of the Reformation. On the other hand, I realized that I, and most other Anglo-Catholics that I know, have an affinity for the Pope. And many of us view him as a necessary and positive influence upon the Church. So I wondered why so many Protestant bodies seemed to detest the Pope. Was there something wrong with what he teaches? To answer this question for myself I read three of Pope Benedict’s books that he had written before his election and found that I was in complete agreement with everything he had written. I also read many encyclicals from previous Popes and found that I was in agreement with them as well. That is not to say that I have understood completely everything I have read nor do I understand fully the Catholic faith in its entirety. But on the whole I have discovered that I agree with and can submit to everything that the Catholic Church teaches. Therefore I came to the conclusion that there was nothing to stop me from becoming Catholic. After all, being a Protestant means that you are protesting against something – that *is* what the Reformation was all about; but I found that there was nothing that I could protest against with regards to the Pope or the Catholic Church.

Conclusion #2 – the Church cannot operate on private interpretation of Scripture. Throughout seminary I spent a lot of time being angry with those who I considered heretics. I thought that Scripture and the historic Tradition of the Church were so obvious that no one had a right to try to change the Church to fit their own image of it. And yet I was bewildered at the state of the Episcopal Church. How could so many people not see the obvious meaning of Scripture? How could they not see that what they were doing was changing the Church into something that it was not meant to be? These questions haunted me. But in the past year I have discovered the key to my dilemma. I have finally realized that the reason there are so many difficulties in, not just the Episcopal Church, but all mainline Protestant bodies, is because of private interpretation of Scripture. I realized too that without a source of authority to back it up even my own conservative views were based on private interpretation. Therefore I came to the conclusion that those who I called heretics had just as much a right to think

what they think as I do what I think. This was a very hard realization. What I realized is that there was no ultimate Truth within Protestant Christianity. So my conclusion was that I could not stay in a Church that did not have access to that ultimate Truth.

Conclusion #3 – reunion with Rome will not be on my own terms.

I have many clergy friends with who I shared a similar hope and dream while I was still an Anglican priest and that is for the Anglican Churches, or at least the Anglo-Catholic parts of it, to be reunited with Rome. For a very long time I have realized that the divisions of the Church are a very bad thing and I originally thought that I had been called by God to try to heal those divisions from within Anglicanism. While many of my friends still feel this calling I obviously do not. And why is this? In my discussions with friends in the last year I have realized that many (but by no means all) of my friends, those who feel called to stay within the Anglican Communion, do not have the same thoughts about the Pope and the Catholic Church that I do. I must say that it surprised me to discover that even amongst some Anglo-Catholic clergy there seems to be a list of grievances against the Catholic Church and the Pope just like in any other Protestant body. There seems to be the thought that there are parts of doctrine in which Rome is wrong and Anglicans are right and therefore Rome should make some sort of concession in order to heal and reunify the Church. On the other hand, from my own elementary understanding of the Catholic Church it seemed to me that if there were to be any reunification Anglicans would have to submit to the authority of the Pope and the magisterium of the Church on all points of dogma and doctrine – even the points that they may not agree with or understand. Therefore I have concluded that if I am to be joined to the Catholic Church it will not be on my own terms.

There is more that I could say about my theological reasons for becoming Catholic but these are three of the biggest reasons and I believe they suffice for explaining how I came to this decision theologically. I will now resume where I left off in the timeline of the last year.

After much prayer and coming to the conclusions that I have just mentioned I had a second meeting with Fr. Gremmels. I told him that when he said for me to “leave now” it really caused me to re-examine my plan to wait five years. He then suggested that I go and discuss this with the Catholic bishop of Fort Worth. At the time this was Bp. Delaney but he was in very poor health at the time and his successor would soon be consecrated. Therefore, he suggested that I wait until after Bp. Kevin Vann’s consecration, which would not be until July, and then write a letter to him asking to meet with him. At this point it was still a couple of months until Bp. Vann’s consecration. So in the meantime I continued to pray, read and study in order to discern God’s will for my life.

After my second meeting with Fr. Gremmels I wrote a second email to Dr. Howard dated June 9, 2005. The following quotes indicate where I was spiritually and theologically at that time. I wrote, “It seems that every day my mind and heart are closer to leaving for Rome.” From this you can see that I was more and more feeling a call in my life from God to join the Catholic Church. Of this call in my life I wrote, “I want to follow my Lord and I believe that it is of utmost importance that I follow Him now!” From this you can see that I no longer thought that waiting five years was an option. If I was truly being called into the Catholic Church then making a decision now was necessary. I went on to write, “I have made a deal with myself that I will try to wait it out for five years and if nothing has changed after that point then I would seek the pastoral provision of the Catholic Church. But I am not sure that

this is a good idea...Should I not leave now?" But I did not do anything yet because I had not met with the soon to be Bp. Vann.

Bp. Kevin Vann was consecrated on July 13, 2005 and I was in attendance. I made it a point to arrive early so that I could pray the Rosary with special intention for his ministry in the Catholic Diocese of Fort Worth. One week later I wrote my letter to Bp. Vann. In that letter I wrote, "John Henry Cardinal Newman once said, 'What is certain is that you ought to act on a conviction of the divinity of the Catholic Roman Church, if you are to join it.' It is from this conviction that I am requesting an appointment to meet with you to discuss this possibility of the Pastoral Provision." As you can see I had at this point already made up my mind to leave for Rome. But as I mentioned at the beginning of this Apology I can be a reactionary person at times and at this time last year it would have been very easy for me to act quickly, possibly too quickly. But God did not let that happen.

On August 18, 2005 I met with Bp. Vann for the first time. Instead of letting me act too hastily he slowed me down and made me consider further if I truly wanted to convert to Catholicism. And at the time I was so happy to talk with him that I did not become impatient with what I otherwise would have considered a delay. He said at that meeting that we would schedule further appointments so that I could continue to discern my call to the Catholic Church and throughout the fall and early we winter we continued to meet together on a monthly basis. During this whole time my conviction of becoming Catholic did not waver.

Now at this point someone may want to ask this question of me, "If you were already convinced at that point that you should convert to Catholicism then why did you wait until now to do so?" Someone may also want to ask a further question, "Didn't you think it was dishonest to continue ministering in the Episcopal Church even after you felt called to the Catholic Church?" These are both excellent questions and need to be addressed.

I want to answer the second question first. Did I think it was dishonest to continue in the Episcopal Church? I would have to answer yes to this question. It was starting to trouble my conscience to remain in the Episcopal Church but not for the reasons you may think. Most people might assume that it was because Rome views Anglican orders as invalid that my conscience was troubled but that is not the reason. I had come to the firm conclusion that among the many reasons that could be listed as proof that the Reformation was a very bad thing the most obvious reason for me was that it had destroyed the unity of the Church. I came to believe that the unity of the Church on earth is found under the headship of the Pope. Therefore, to continue to celebrate at the altar week after week and to preach the Gospel within the Episcopal Church was telling people something that I no longer believed. By continuing to minister within the Episcopal Church I was by my actions telling the laity that it was ok to remain in the Episcopal Church. And yet I no longer believed that it was. I had come to a firm belief that in order for the Church to be one we all needed to come back into the Catholic Church. Jesus did not pray that His Church might be one for no reason. He truly wants His Church to be one and I had come to the firm conclusion that to stay was a sin against that unity that Christ desires for His Church.

And now I must answer the first question. Why did I not leave the Episcopal Church sooner? I would say that God was stalling me off from conversion in order that I might make the most informed decision possible. You do not want to make a decision this big without having all the information. And

up to the end of last year I had only spoken about this desire to convert with people on the Catholic side of things. I had not yet spoken to Bp. Iker or any other Episcopalian about this matter. I now know that if I had been too hasty and left the Episcopal Church without talking to Bp. Iker I might have always wondered if I had made the right decision in becoming Catholic.

My first meeting with Bp. Iker was in late January at the annual diocesan clergy retreat. It was at that meeting that Bp. Iker suggested I speak with other clergy who have not left the Episcopal Church even though they share similar convictions with me about the Pope and the Catholic Church. After speaking with these other members of the clergy he wanted me to come back and see him in late March. This seemed to be more than fair. I remember thinking to myself that maybe I would even be swayed by their arguments and therefore remain in the Episcopal Church, even though I could not possibly imagine what they could say to convince me. But I tried to go into these meetings with an open mind so that I could really understand their reasons for staying. I will not now go into the reasons that they gave to stay. Let it suffice that I was not swayed by their arguments. In fact I came out of those meetings with an even stronger resolve that joining the Catholic Church was in fact the right decision. I used the rest of the time between late January and late March to speak more openly to close Episcopal friends about my desire to convert. I did this to continue to test myself – to truly determine once and for all if it was right to convert to Catholicism.

On March 23, 2006 I met with Bp. Vann at his residence at St. Patrick Cathedral in downtown Fort Worth. At that meeting I told him that on the following day I would have to meet with Bp. Iker to discuss my decision of whether I would leave or stay within the Episcopal Church. I believed that I was now ready to go. In fact, I told him that throughout this process I had not wavered once on my decision to become Catholic. Bp. Vann told me to put it into God's hands and to ask that the Virgin Mary pray that a door might be opened so that I could do what I felt God calling me to do. That is exactly what I did.

On Friday, March 24, 2006, the Eve of the Annunciation, I had my second meeting with Bp. Iker. In that meeting Bp. Iker said that if I had not made a firm decision to become Catholic then he could in good conscience let me serve out the rest of my time at St. Vincent's. But if I had already made the decision to become Catholic then it would be best if I left St. Vincent's by the end of the month. He gave me one week to make my final decision. I met with Bp. Vann again that night and I told him that I truly believed I had made my final decision. He told me that it had become for me a matter of conscience to join the Catholic Church and that if I did not obey my conscience now it would be a sin. This is also the conclusion that I had come to on my own.

On Thursday, March 30, 2006, I hand delivered my letter to Bp. Iker in which I renounced my ordination vows as an Episcopal priest. I could see in his face that he was sad to see me go but I truly believe that he understands and respects my decision. It is my hope that you who have read this will also be able to understand why I have left the Episcopal Church. In closing I will quote from my letter to Bp. Iker, "My prayers will be with you...in the coming months and years with my most sincere prayer being that one day Catholics and orthodox Anglicans will (along with all those who love and serve the Lord)...celebrate together at the same altar."

May the peace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the prayers of His Ever Blessed Mother be with you always.