

Jeremy Slagley, Faith Journey

Theme: Truth, Authority

I was brought up Baptist, and had an understanding of the inerrancy of scripture and love of God. We stopped going to church when I was around 10 years old. I was “saved” at about 14 years old, but I didn’t feel any different, or that I had to avoid sin. I was baptized and began attending church on my own. However, my conduct was “up to me” and mortal sin is a way of life for many teenagers. I must say that I really did not have any prejudice against Catholicism—there just weren’t many around, and my father was very fair and not biased as the high school principal.

All this time, I was looking for truth—young people seek it. Something to live and die for. What was worthy for me to give the gift of my life? I was a patriot, so I joined the Army. While at West Point, I realized the value of self-sacrifice, discipline, the greater good, the importance of authority, but for what? All the cadences, songs, and instruction were designed to make patriots ready to give their lives for their country. Very good, but I began to see the flaws and errors in our country as well. Make no mistake, this is the greatest country on earth, and I’m proud, and grateful to God to be an American. However, I could not give myself completely when the ultimate cause may be flawed. I will fulfill my responsibilities and serve my country faithfully, but the country is not the greatest good. As the Knights of Columbus motto states, “Pro Ecclesia, Pro Patria”—to love your country is to want your country to serve God, not to say, “my country, right or wrong.”

While I was there, I met several Mormons. Young men who gave up their careers in the middle of West Point to be missionaries. Young men who disciplined themselves to be chaste, kind, mature. These guys actually were willing to curb their inner desires for God. I was impressed. However, I read the book, attended their meetings, and decided perhaps it was a little too far out there.

I also ran into my first atheist. It was a surprise to me because he was just like everyone else. It wasn’t youthful imprudence, but because his parents and step parents were atheists and he was raised an atheist. I felt compelled to witness to him, but he pointed out the apparent disagreements in the different gospels. I had no answer. When all you have is the Bible, if someone doesn’t believe the Bible, you have nothing to start from. Also, if my atheist friend was also living the same degree of morality as those around us, why didn’t being a Christian make any difference in our conduct.

One other person I must mention is one of my basic training roommates, Pat Tomlinson. He was a very active Catholic, chaired the CYC, etc. All that was fine. What struck me was that his high school sweetheart, whom he did marry after graduation, and he were

chaste. Where I grew up (heartland, USA), there was very little negative stigma associated with immoral behavior. Certainly people did not fear hellfire as a consequence of their sins, or even recognize them as sins. Here was a man who would not have suffered in this world for joining in the immorality, but chose the greater good for the glory of God. He exemplified what West Point was trying to instill in us.

By the Grace of God, I met my wife, Buffy, in 1990 and we decided to get married after we had seen each other twice in 12 months. I had to sign a document saying that our kids would be raised Catholic, but I figured they would come around. We went to Mass together and were married by Father Owen Mullen at the Cadet Chapel two days after graduation (because that was the first open date—marriages were scheduled years ahead of time hour by hour starting immediately following graduation.) Even at West Point, I stopped attending Protestant services because there was nothing there for me. General Protestant service can't actually make any real conclusions or guide our daily lives, because some Protestant group will take legitimate offense. Fr. Mullen, however, treated everybody like his kids. He was a lieutenant colonel, but would put you in a headlock as you were saluting him. We were all his kids, Catholic or not.

I transferred to the US Air Force and Buffy and I continued going to Mass at San Antonio, TX, for our 4 months there, then at Charleston, SC for 3 years. We were blessed with 2 daughters there and then applied for a European tour. I was a little disappointed when we got Incirlik AB, TU. We watched the Midnight Express movie before we left. When we got off the plane, I realized we were NOT home. It was a fairly arid region with mountains, and minarets as far as we could see. Everyone spoke Turkish, and they were in charge. Well, there wasn't much else to do for entertainment except church, and Buffy and I ran the nursery, washed altar cloths, and helped out. We got involved with local charities to help the street children, the old folks home (that was only for the elderly with absolutely NO family), etc. Things changed when we got a new priest who was an ex-Army helicopter pilot in Viet Nam, Fr. Ed Moran. We hit it off right away since we were both former Army. Fr. Ed appointed me the leader of the men's charitable committee in the parking lot as we were getting ready to go renovate a family's house downtown.

Now, when you're in foreign country, you naturally begin to seek out others like yourself, and you begin to identify yourself more and more with your homeland. When the foreign country is also overwhelmingly Muslim, you also begin to feel very Christian. When we toured around Turkey, we visited St. Paul's well in Tarsus, the home of Mary in Ephesus, the Cappadocia region where St. Basil and St. Cyril lived. We saw many ancient Christian churches that had been defaced by conquering Muslim armies. We saw crusader castles constructed by the Christians trying to regain the Holy Land. When I was looking around and identifying with these early Christians, it dawned on me that they were NOT Baptists. Now, my dad was a history major, a history teacher, and a voracious reader. We loved history. I had never made this connection before. I don't know how I

missed it. All these early Christians were Catholic. I was OK with that. I just thought that nobody was completely right—there was no true authority. Everything was relative.

Well, one day Fr. Ed asked me to run for parish council. I told him I wasn't Catholic, and he said that was OK, I should run anyway. I had been thinking of joining the church for family unity, but just continuing to do my own thing and regard truth as relative. I talked with Buffy about it, and I could not believe the things she said. When I said that some people are just better off Protestant, she actually said, nope, the Catholic church is actually better for everyone. SHE couldn't believe what she was saying. She reasoned that if we all had to tell our sins to a real person in confession, we would be less likely to do them again. Mind you, we were not living by all the teachings of the church then. In the end, she told me to stay Protestant since I really didn't agree with the Catholic church.

Well, Buffy gave me an hour to go meet with a deacon who was with us at Christmas on break from the seminary in Rome. To my astonishment, this nice 2d Lt said flat out, that no, some people were not "just better off" as Protestants, but that the Catholic church was actually better for everyone, and it was the one true church. I was flabbergasted. We went to speak with Fr. Ed, and we prayed about it. Then he offered me this tape set about common Protestant objections to the Catholic faith by some guy named Scott Hahn. My goodness.

Here was a Protestant who knew and loved the Bible, who was led against his will, but because of his intellectual integrity and desire to follow God's will, to the church. He had to accept great sacrifice and self-denial to do so. He lost his friends and family. He lost his job and career. He also spoke my language. I was convinced. In effect, I had finally found something to live and die for—an authority I could trust and follow. A reason to deny myself, and to discipline myself. I had found the Eucharist— the Way, the Truth, and the Life. I started RCIA in January and entered the Church in April of 1998. This was the fulfillment of my Baptist upbringing, the fulfillment of my training in the Army to give myself for the greatest good. And in giving myself completely to God and His Church, I was compelled to give myself completely to my wife and children. Yes, I will still do my duty to my country faithfully, as Christ would want. But, God is first in my life.

Well, 26 years of sin takes a while to beat out of yourself. The Air Force moved us to Iowa to pursue a masters' degree and there we discovered TAN publishers. We were still wrestling with family planning. I was willing to follow the church in all things, but it takes two. Buffy was from New York City, where everything looks crowded, and everything is tolerated, no judgment is passed, and even in her alma mater, Fordham University, libertine liberalism is the daily bread. We got a book set offered by TAN including Fr. Schouppe's books, Purgatory, and Hell. Buffy read Purgatory first, and it was scary. She gave it to me to read. Purgatory is real, and it's no fun. We should want

to avoid it—I was worried. Next she read Hell, and concluded that we didn't need to worry about Purgatory, because we were headed for Hell. The editor likened this life to school. Think how much we study for final exams. If the stakes are high, you study even harder. Some classes you may shoot for a B. In life, the stakes are eternally high. Yes, you might pass with a C, which means summer school in Purgatory. But you don't want to bet your eternity on what questions the teacher will ask. It's better to overstudy. Shoot for an A, and you'll probably still get some Purgatory, but you'll be glad you did. The basic question is that striving for God may mean you miss out on some fun sinning. But, the sinning isn't actually fun, it's damaging, and you'll be so happy there, you won't regret it.

Another thing happened with TAN. Our kids were very nice, but they lived for Disney. They only watched 1 hour of TV a day, and usually a Disney movie. But they live for it. Buffy then read a Catholic Pre-schooler's guide book that related this story. A kid heard about Moses parting the Red Sea, and remarked that it was no big deal, because he saw a cartoon character do the same thing. That's right. Kids are just figuring out what's real and not. If they are used to big special effects, then find out it was all made up when they reach their teens, they will reason that the miracles they heard of were probably also all made up. Buffy had me throw away about \$250 of Disney stuff that day. We went to the local Catholic book store and started buying saint videos. Our kids took it in stride. When Buffy explained that God would not want us to get too caught up in Disney, our two girls helped her throw it away. They wanted to love God. Then all the distractions were gone. We surrounded them with the church.

We threw away all artificial contraception, went to confession, and just lived chastely for a few months because we were not ready for more kids. Then a young Russian couple we knew from school and church asked if we wanted to get together and say the Rosary. WHAT? Twenty year-olds who just wanted to get together and pray? And they did! We had them over to our house and they visited then got our their Rosaries. Having learned about OL Fatima, we began the daily Rosary. Soon we were expecting #3. This was God's plan for a gentle surrender to His authority.

Around the same time, my oldest brother got arrested for DUI and lost his job. He came to church with us and the priest that night was clearly stating that you could NOT get drunk, use drugs, be promiscuous, or engage in any sinful activity and get to heaven. He was explaining that God wanted us to love Him. My brother cried and was ready that day. He went to RCIA for 14 months and joined the church in 2000.

Now, mind you that my Father was a freemason. He refused to attend Aaron's entry into the church. The more Catholic we got, the more it caused trouble. Finally, in San Antonio, when we already had Francis (#4), he blew up at Amanda (#1). She immediately prayed a rosary for him. The next month my mother was diagnosed with ovarian cancer. Then my father ripped his right shoulder. Then my mother had a mass

removed from her knee, then my dad's retina detached, then his other retina detached, then he ripped his other shoulder. My parents went through 7 surgeries and immense suffering in 2 years. With each recognition of their human frailty, I think they were coming a little closer to God. Then in September last year my dad was diagnosed with terminal pancreatic cancer. The last 4 months of his life were excruciating. We drove out to Illinois so he could hold Rosemary (#5). I flew out in January to be with him in his final hours. In the end, he was in so much pain that he had surrendered. He was resolved to God's will. When he was at his last, an Italian priest came in and gave him the last rites. My dad actually repeated the "Lord Have Mercy" and the priest absolved him of his sins (as far as he was able) and committed him to the Mother of God. The moment he died, the children here were saying the intercessory prayers for him at children's adoration, and Buffy began the chaplet of Divine Mercy—1500 hours.

Each day, God calls all of us closer. He is the Truth. His church has the Authority to help us govern ourselves. Even when it's hard, we must give the assent of Faith and follow where so many saints before us have gone. We are here but a short while. We cannot save the world—that's already been done. We must cooperate with God's will for us and observe all that He has commanded us. It's not the faith tried and found lacking, but the faith found too difficult, and so not tried. I am still being converted each day. Each day I beg the Mercy of God. Each day I thank Him for the assurance I get from His church – the proper authority that will lead me to Him.

God bless you all on this feast of St. Lawrence.