

Jacob II, Wrestling with God

Suddenly, as the priest turned, I beheld Him. There He was, coming down the aisle toward me, the Lamb of God still present. As I knelt on the floor in the back corner of the Church, my soul and all my being were flooded by God's immanent goodness. In my limited experience as a Lutheran chaplain, I had never even heard of Solemn Exposition of The Holy Eucharist. Indeed, I wondered what was happening. What Rite was this? Hungering for God, I was being wooed by Love, and in my search, a deeper awareness was granted, not to mention the teaching that went with it. But to consider this now is to run ahead in my story.

How blessed I considered my early life. There were at least three reasons for considering myself fortunate. First, I was born on the Feast of the Annunciation. Originally, in that hidden moment, from Mary's heart and lips came that powerful word, "let," (the same first word God used in creating) and her "let" brought into being a state of things, which would alter the whole course of human history, through the Incarnation of our Lord Jesus. In a special way, because of being born on this feast day, the enormous significance of God's Word and work was highlighted for me. March 25th was also my earthly Mother's birthday, and thus we were gifts to each other on this day, just as Jesus, the Word Incarnate, was God's great Gift to all, including me, on Annunciation Day. Later on, greater awareness of this giftedness enabled me to appreciate the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper, the Eucharist, more than ever before.

Secondly, I was baptized that first summer of my life, in a Lutheran mission congregation, and this blessing of baptism would make all the difference in how my life proceeded, as I tried to listen to and live out God's call initiated then.

What great grace the third one also expressed. At a very early age I was blessed with a consciousness of God's presence and was led by God through the spiritual wilderness of childhood.

For my brother and I, growing up in Quincy, Massachusetts, where we were born, was quite difficult. I was no saintly child, but I remember my mother teaching me some prayers and sending me to Sunday school at the Lutheran mission. Yet, life at home was mostly non-religious. The greatest challenge came in facing and trying to get along with the children in our neighborhood, all of which were Roman Catholic, except for us. Back in the later 1940's, interpretation of Father Leonard Feeney's teaching on *Ecclesiam Nulla Salus*, no salvation outside the Church, had permeated this region of New England. He was a well-known Jesuit, who became embroiled in controversy with Church authorities because of portions of his teaching, which were condemned as heresy. Rigid interpretations, coupled with the sins of developing hate and prejudice, unleashed what became a wave of terror.

When only a little girl, a neighbor informed me that we were "heathens" and "were going to Hell." A few years later when I learned a little about Hell, it seemed that we were already condemned, by them at least, if not by God. Of course, as a child, I did not know the meaning of those words irritatingly voiced to me, but I understood well the pain of isolation and rejection. We were not allowed to play with or to associate with the other children. We were snubbed; ignored; called names; frequently pelted with rocks; beat up; lied about; stolen from; had personal belongings, school, or Campfire Girls projects damaged; and we were treated abusively and unfairly by some Catholic teachers.

For me, summers brought welcome relief from this torture. They were spent near Plymouth, Massachusetts, where God refreshed my soul and showed me many splendors of Creation. A few years later, during High School, we removed from Quincy and settled in West Concord, part of the old village of Musketaquid.

Concord was a good growing up place, but I came under the strong influence of Unitarianism, American Romanticism, and Transcendentalism. When we moved there my parents, and I along with them, joined the nearby Congregational church, where I began to help teach Sunday School. Sermons there were strongly influenced by the philosophical milieu of Concord. This I slowly began to recognize, for in the course of studies at the old Concord High School, Concord authors, such as

Emerson, Thoreau, and Louisa May Alcott, and others like Nathaniel Hawthorne, were required reading. And so my mind was steeped in these ideas. In a way my Concord experiences were even a preparation for what would follow in just a few years, though it was not foreseen and not chosen based upon any knowledge of Concord authors and their views.

In my second year of college, volunteer work with the children at Brook Farm endeared them to me and I to them. They enriched my life, and helped to shape it in several areas, especially parenting. Brook Farm had once been the dairy farm of Marie and Charles Ellis, and part of the land had been used briefly as a military training site for the Massachusetts militia during the US Civil War. This dairy farm had changed hands several times, eventually becoming the Brook Farm children's home and school, where I visited and worked. However, the name, 'Brook Farm,' came into use when the utopian community, begun by author, George Ripley, started up a social experiment in community living. This experiment also involved some of the Concord authors and well-known people of the day. Margaret Fuller, Nathaniel Hawthorne and his wife, A. Bronson Alcott, Elizabeth Peabody, and others participated at least for a while in this endeavor. Some were involved in its founding. Many of these Brook Farm folks were influenced by Ralph Waldo Emerson, a contemporary Concord author to these others, and the founder of Transcendentalism in America. It is interesting to note that Emerson resigned from serving as minister in 1832 after a sermon questioning the orthodox view of the Lord's Supper. He too wrestled with understanding Holy Communion and thought it extremely important. Yet, Emerson himself did not live at Brook Farm.

I pondered the reasons for Brook Farm's successes and failure. Beyond small pox and fires, personalities and finances, social principles and philosophy, poor soil and lightning, there had to exist among them some theology and a way of relating to God and each other, or, there had to be some deficiency in this area. It certainly was different from the community of Jesus' handpicked twelve Apostles. The commitment of these individuals waned, and the community dissolved, each one moving on in their lives. Brook Farm was eventually sold to a group of Lutherans. The Lutheran Association for Works of Mercy was formed, and Brook Farm was used as an orphanage for nearly 100 years. It was through the Lutheran church in Boston that in the early '60's I was drawn to visit the children. It was my experience there that made me wonder why I was born, for what purpose.

There was also one event during these college days, which had a profound spiritual impact on me. That occurred during the summer that my brother was involved in a car accident. A young boy riding his bicycle, no-hands-style; cut across a four-lane highway suddenly turning in front of my brother's car. The youngster was carrying home strawberries and a bag of sugar from the local farm stand. In the collision, as the boy and his bicycle were flipped up onto the hood of the car, the boy sustained two fractures. His arm healed well, but the fractured skull left him in a coma. God alone knew whether he would survive. For my brother, those tense days were like walking on a greased tight rope.

With a rather simple belief that Jesus heals, I prayed for everyone, particularly the boy. Throughout, I wondered about prayer and what really happens in prayer. I wondered how miracles are accomplished, and I weighed what is it that is important to pray about. To my young mind and heart, it seemed that one major reason to pray for the boy, beyond his need for physical healing, was because salvation is of ultimate concern. He needed time to get to know Jesus, I reasoned. Praise God, within less than 6 weeks the boy was not only out of the hospital, back with his family, but riding his bicycle again.

During the prior year, while still a student at a large secular college in Boston, the spiritual road had already become more of a roller coaster ride, with twists and turns. After being assaulted one evening before class, I nearly abandoned worship altogether and relegated Jesus to the fringe of belief and life. However, God was constantly getting my attention, silently working conversion. I met students of many different religious backgrounds, and they challenged my beliefs, as much as the instructors had done, particularly as I worked in forming the Lutheran Club on campus and developing the Interfaith Council.

Previously I had learned to stay clear of Catholics, and to enter a Catholic church never came to mind. Yet, paradoxically, among the many new friends made at school I met a few lovely Catholic ladies. We talked endlessly about what we believed and why we believed it. We invited each other

to dialog in the developing religious groups on campus to which we each belonged. Father Hoffler, S. J., of the Newman Center, even invited the Lutherans to a Twelfth Night gathering. The ecumenical climate was changing for the better in my life and in the area. Especially helpful to me was the Young Adults group at the Missouri Synod Lutheran church in downtown Boston. Through friendships, reflection, and discussions I became aware that my childhood concept of God, as a kindly, super-duper grandfather, had been gradually changing. It was being transformed into a rudimentary knowledge of The Father, through knowing Jesus.

In fact, it was at a Lutheran Student Federation retreat, entitled 'Making Doubts Constructive,' that I was forced to lean entirely upon God. I needed help to make a most important decision. The retreat weekend in Whitinsville would end with a communion service. Anxiety rose up in me like some terrible giant taking over. For a time I had been angry. Mixed with this I had become confused at school about what to believe. Was Jesus who He declared Himself to be--the Son of God? Were the apostles correct in announcing Him to be the Word Incarnate, our Savior? I had never doubted the existence of God, but the retreat pastor had spoken of Jesus in words, which were quite different from the college professors, as if Jesus was alive and well and caring. His message was mind boggling, especially given my immaturity and my challenging experiences. Ascent was not as easy as one might think it should be, particularly when college professors would fill your ears with teaching that Jesus either did not exist or that He was not Divine.

I had been wrestling with at least two issues. First, there was the age-old problem of the mystery of suffering and of God's providence. After listening to the Nuremberg Trials and other TV news, I puzzled, just **how** could a good God allow so many difficult and awful things to happen in the world?

In addition, I had reasoned, based on the false teaching by my history professor, that if Jesus was not the Son of the Father, the Word Incarnate, not God, and not good, then it made no sense to receive Holy Communion. There was the dilemma: but which was right? It would be false and wrong to go through the motions of receiving Jesus in Holy Communion, if I did not believe. Part of the problem was that, due to our family move, I had not been confirmed yet, and I had not completed study of many important areas. Yet, I had been taught that we truly receive Jesus body and blood in the Sacrament of the Altar. The decisive moment had arrived - my first communion opportunity. Where did I stand? What did I believe? What would the pastor say when I asked him about Communion? What was truth? Discussion with the retreat pastor had not completely settled things. While he could grant permission to receive Holy Communion in this setting before being confirmed, it was a very serious matter to receive Communion unworthily. Reception as an unbeliever or under any false circumstances would be serious and was not recommended. Well, the only thing I knew to do was to pray.

I read the Bible and prayed intensely, a large part of the night, about what to believe, who to believe, and about what to do. In the morning God brought me peace and understanding. In addition to this tranquility of soul, great assurance was given me about the Divinity of the Person of Jesus, and I wept at the realization and the goodness of the help I had received so promptly. Though the answers to all of my questions did not come in a flash, I began to know Jesus as my Lord and my God.

Filled with a new hunger to devour Scripture, I read from the Bible at every free moment, for therein and therewith, by the grace of God, Holy Spirit made the Word known in powerful and personal encounters. It was then that the desire surfaced to attend seminary for Biblical Studies, though this call was not realized until many years later, after being wed and our children were older. Many years of working with children, teaching, and serving as a Christian Education Director provided much joy and wonderful opportunities to grow. It was in 1986 that I began seminary studies in Maine at Bangor Theological Seminary, transferring after about three years to the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Gettysburg, Pennsylvania.

Returning to the time when my family move to Concord, and the other move to attend college where I choose to worship at the Lutheran Church, I experienced more than four years of confirmation classes, though they were not all consecutive. Therefore, when as a young adult I was finally confirmed as a Lutheran, I felt rather staunch in my faith. Much prayer, study of the Lutheran

confessional writings in the Book of Concord, as well as discussions with my pastor were preparation. However, my spiritual journey, as you can discover, was anything but ordinary and smooth. Those were days and months of struggle, of questioning, of wrestling with God, like another type of Jacob.

While a volunteer at Brook Farm, at the church in Boston I met the man I would wed, and he too volunteered at Brook Farm, later becoming a special education teacher in their school. As our first of our four children was born, we also adopted one of the boys from Brook Farm as our son. The years of child rearing went by swiftly, but the marriage declined, ending in divorce. When, through prayer, the decision was made to return to college and take seminary classes, for the second time in my life, a spiritual crisis of sorts arose. During this academic period I was also serving as a Chaplain. I was working on a second masters degree, a Masters of Sacred Theology, at the Lutheran seminary. By verbal arrangement with the professor, papers on the Fourth Gospel, the Gospel of John, were adapted to fit with my thesis topic. I in my study of God's word in John, I focused for a while on Jesus' words from the cross to his Mother, Miriam, and to the Beloved Disciple. As I prayed over my study and prayed Scripture, grace upon grace was showered upon me. It was as if Holy Spirit had turned on a spiritual light bulb and I could see clearly Jesus' words in a new light, in a fuller way. I was wowed over this revelation, that Jesus had established Mary as Mother of the Church! I had never considered that before.

I was soon spurred into worshipping at a nearby Roman Catholic church and talking with one of its priests. I knew that a fairly good theological fit already existed, but what about the rest of the issues like Holy Orders, purgatory, and the dogma about Mary. One by one God assisted me over all of the hurdles. Before the end of a year and a half, I knew that God desired me to enter the Church. This was a time of much prayer and independent study, RCIA classes, catechism classes, and discussions with the Pastor. The actual decision was not as difficult as the earlier one about Communion, because I believed it to be God's will to enter the Church, and could not say 'no' to God, nor did I want to say 'no.' Every time I knelt before the monstrance, I looked at my Beloved face to face, and I didn't want to ever leave Him. There was, however, a complicated wrestling match, that brought me much angst. It came both at the nursing home where I served as chaplain and also in my connection to the Lutheran church.

While I loved the people and doing pastoral care at the nursing home, part of my many responsibilities involved arranging for worship leaders from many Christian denominations to hold worship services and teach Sunday School. Since I didn't believe all of what they taught, I did not want to be fostering false teaching, especially where Holy Communion was concerned. Eucharist became a prime area of tension, even at worship in the Lutheran church.

On the Lutheran side of the internal search for answers, I found myself, not only doing Scripture study and study of the liturgy, but reviewing seminary notes on the sacraments, as well a re-reading the Lutheran confessions, reading parts of Luther's writings and those of other Lutherans. At the time of the Reformation early Lutheran writers had not given any metaphysical explanation for how the elements of bread and wine become sacrament. Furthermore, the confessional writings of the Lutherans had not the status or force of dogma, as does the dogma of the Catholic Church.

On the Catholic side of this interior quest for truth, there was also Scripture study and study of portions of The Sacramentary, G.I.R.M., Canon law, the Raccolta, documents of the Vatican Council II, John Henry Newman's *Apologia*. There was further reading of the Didache, the teaching of early apostles; study of Papal Encyclicals and Letters; and return to study of the early Church fathers and consideration of their witness of life as well as their writings. What were they willing to die for? Consideration was given to the Council of Trent's decisions, while study of the Catechism of the Catholic Church was ongoing. Much conversation developed with our Lord, this same Lord who accomplished the change of water into wine at the Wedding Feast at Cana, the same Lord to whom the Father had testified at his baptism, the same Lord who was transfigured before three of the Apostles. It was the Lord, whose Divine nature had seemed so hidden until God chose the time for revelation.

I kept praying for grace to understand and fully accept the Church teachings for I knew interiorly that Jesus wanted me in the Church. Jesus always wins. He changed me into a Catholic believer.

In the Liturgy of the Eucharist we find those words addressed to the Father, "let it become for us the body and blood of Jesus Christ, your only Son, our Lord" (underlining emphasis added). There it was again, that powerful word, '**let.**' In addition, the word '**become**' made a particular impression upon me, as if neon lights were surrounding it. I pondered the way that Jesus, the Word Incarnate, the power of God for salvation, was made present to us through the ministerial priesthood via Holy Spirit. The action of God in "let" and "become" indeed became more evident. Through the nourishment of this real food we are changed and brought to holiness. This was the effect of the power of God with whom we commune in this great and holy sacrament. Not only did I have a great desire for reading Scripture, a tremendous thirst for the Living Water that Jesus spoke about at the Well of Sychar was fostered within me. And I pleaded, "Please, give me this living water that I may not thirst any longer."

The day eventually came when, sure of the Church and that Jesus was truly present there, I, not being in a leadership role that day, got up and walked out the door of the Lutheran church. I drove directly to Mass at the Catholic church. The good sermon alone was not enough to hold me there among the Lutherans. I had to be where Jesus awaited me.

Now it has been nearly 10 years since being received into the Roman Catholic Church in 1995, and this electrifying moment of my first encounter with our Eucharistic Lord in Adoration causes me each day to expect to see my Beloved in Eucharist. Each day He says, 'Follow Me,' and I suspect that one day, at my last breath, He may repeat 'Follow Me,' and I will head on into eternal life with Him toward the Father.