

Chalk One up for the Jesuits: A Wayward Christian Comes Home

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Jests and sarcasms abound in reference to the Catholic religious order known as the Society of Jesus. I am reminded of a time when I heard an introduction of a Jesuit keynote speaker in which he was referred to as being both a “Catholic and a Jesuit.” The audience and the presenter shared a hearty session of laughter, the pun being that the Jesuits carry a stigma of having become something other than mainstream Catholics.

The Jesuit keynote paused with a wide grin and then set to the task of delivering one of the most eloquent and spiritually rich presentations I had ever heard. Any doubt that he was anything other than a Catholic had been potently dispelled and I was left with a deep appreciation for this man and his Order, and his faith.

It was this presentation that planted the seeds that would later call me to the profession and ministry of Pastoral Counseling. I had recently become somewhat disenfranchised with the psychoanalytic graduate school I was attending and I was seeking an approach to psychotherapy that did not alienate the spiritual and religious aspects of an individual. I found this program at Loyola College in Maryland, a Jesuit university.

My very first class at Loyola was called Theological Anthropology, which is an eloquent name for the program’s introductory theology course. In this class, we explored the continuity of spirituality as it runs through nearly every aspect of most every culture on earth. Joining me in this course were many wonderful people whose viewpoints and worldviews astounded me. Finally, I was hearing my own beliefs and understandings being spoken by others. To my

amazement, those doing the speaking were not only Roman Catholic, many of them were Roman Catholic clergy and religious!

Could these people be the same people I had been taught about in my Evangelical training as a child? Could they possibly be the one group I had been trained to debate as a Protestant Minister? Was this the Church I had shunned in favor of a more liberal version of liturgical Christianity known as Anglicanism?

Indeed, they were the “ones”, but they were certainly not the “same!” This was not the Catholic Church that I had been warned against and trained to contest. Where was the bondage I had been told existed to keep Catholics in line? Where was the lack of spirituality and rote repetition I was to expect as the norm for members of this church? What about the condemnation of guilt and sin?

This Church was none of the things I had been led to believe. This Church was its people, and its people were the finest I had ever encountered in my lifetime. It is this factor that captures the essence of what it was that finally released the chains that held me outside the gates of the one true Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church for so long.

As I joined this Church, I joined the “communion of the faithful,” which is a family that I had been destined to discover for my entire lifetime. For me, this discovery came in a series of stages and with many strings attached. In order to understand this, the reader should know a bit about the actual journey itself.

My first exposure to the Christian faith was, as it is for many, via an inheritance from birth. I was born into a very religious family that followed the Lutheran tradition and it was in a Lutheran church that I received the first sacrament of baptism. A few years later, my family relocated and we began attending a United Methodist church. It is here that I received the

sacrament of confirmation. I also received the sacrament of Holy Matrimony while a participant in this tradition.

Experiencing a call to ministry, I began preparation by attending a local Bible Institute. While there, I was exposed to aspects of church history that probed much deeper than my brief knowledge of my denomination's history. I learned about the 1st, 10th and 15th centuries, and I began to get a sense of what was really going on in the church over time. I began to gain an understanding of the church and how the wounds of schism had created nothing short of a virtual scatter plot of denominations and counter-denominations. I now became aware of words like "mainline," "conservative" and "reformed."

Honestly, it was all terribly confusing and I found myself quite disillusioned by it all. With so many versions of truth, who could possibly be right? For me the answer was becoming clearer day by day, if I wanted the truth of it all I needed to move towards the source, but what was the source and where could it be found?

I was able to narrow the possibilities down to three. The original church would have to be the Orthodox Church, the Roman Catholic Church or the Anglican Church. Of these three, only the Orthodox and Catholic churches laid any claim to being the original church. The Anglicans were content to simply acknowledge that they were a version of the one Holy, Catholic and Apostolic church. This appealed to me because it reduced the duality felt in the Catholic/Orthodox continuum. I had also recently been informed that my heritage was part British and of the Churchill variety, so the Anglican Church seemed like a valid choice.

Therefore, after some brief inquiry into Orthodoxy and Roman Catholicism, I established a relationship with the Anglican Church. One may notice that I have named the Anglican Church

and not the Episcopal Church here. This is quite purposeful, for it is this difference that served to bridge the gap between Protestantism and Catholicism in my journey.

My first conversion towards the Church was as an Anglican Catholic and I deeply embraced the concept of Anglo-Catholicism. I will always cherish this initiation into the mysteries of the church, but I will also never forget the first time someone asked me if my church was the one that left Rome because of a divorce. Indeed, the Anglican Church became an autocephalous and national church during the time of King Henry VIII, and the issue of his seeking a divorce was a significant part of this schism.

We may do well to consider some of the interesting “coincidences” of the journey to this point. Is it not terribly interesting how I was born into the most significant schismatic church, the Lutheran Church, only to be set upon a crash course with Rome by virtue of John Wesley, the founder of Methodism and former Anglican Priest? What grace is this that masterminds such a clever journey? Is it mere chance that this soul was guided through the tangled webs of schism to a place where nothing could remain standing in the presence of this knowledge of the original, authentic Church? I cannot find the randomness in this story, and there is much more to tell! And, dear reader, I think it gets even better!

You have journeyed with me from birth to the year 2003. You have followed me through a most interesting maze of left turns and retraced steps. It is only within the past two years that I have been able to take my very first series of right turns. Hence, we are back at Loyola where I have recently transferred into the graduate school program in pastoral counseling. You will now recognize me as an Anglican who is struggling to clarify his identity in a virtual sea of Roman Catholicism.

You may wonder if I felt any pressure from my institution that has influenced me in my decision. I must be clear in stating that quite the opposite is true. The Loyola program was clear from the very beginning that it was ecumenical in focus, and I never saw anything that contradicted this fact. What was it then that left me feeling empty and in need of a reunion with the Church?

The “cradle Catholic” has most likely never experienced the feeling a convert might describe as “being out in the rain without an umbrella.” As I considered the Roman Catholic Church, I envisioned a giant umbrella that covers each and every communicant. I am left standing out in the rain, and not only is it warm and dry under the umbrella, it is also a place of miraculous energy. It is this energy that I believe every Catholic carries with them. It is a peculiar grace that has somehow become visible to me and it is this grace that I was seeking in my own life. I now understand this to be the Catholic ethos and charism.

We have now come to the defining factor of my conversion to Roman Catholicism. If I had to summarize this entire article in one phrase, I would have to say that “there are many expressions of the Christian faith, but there is only one Christian Church, and the fullness of this Church and the grace it affords can only be experienced by returning to it.” I have, and I can now proclaim that I am a Roman Catholic Christian in full communion with the Holy See. Now is a time when I can say, for the first time in my life, that I feel a true sense of having come “full-circle.” As a former Protestant and Evangelical I had often spoken of the “new birth,” and my goal had been to minister the experience of being “born again” to others. It is another beautiful grace that God has seen fit to minister to me the authentic experience of re-birth as a fully Catholic Christian.

To the Roman Catholic reader, I want to close by stating how important it is for you to remember what it means to be a Catholic and to be a part of the original Christian Church. Perhaps it is something you have been raised with, and maybe sometimes you have felt that Church was more of an obligation than a desire? I pray you might allow my story to remind you of the treasure God has granted you by virtue of your birth. It is my hope that the story of my journey might serve to revitalize your current relationship with our universal Catholic faith, and that you may somehow catch a glimpse of how it feels to not be a part of this worldwide communion.

To the Protestant reader, I only wish to share a few brief words. The consideration of the true and authentic church can actually be broken down into a very fundamental analogy that even a child can understand:

Imagine that your children wanted to see Walt Disney World, so you decided to take them to your local shopping mall so they could see the Disney Store. Do you think your children will have been granted the full experience of Disney? Will they truly understand the fullness of the mystery that Disney represents? Likewise, how might we truly gain the fullness of Christ and his Church if we go to a mere representation of his Church. Why not allow yourself to take the full vacation? Go to Disney and see it all firsthand. This is the journey I have been blessed to have experienced. Won't you join me?