

“SEEK AND YOU SHALL FIND” by Mike Carlton

It's 11:45 p.m. and I can't sleep. What I just heard earlier this evening has once again sent my mind and emotions into anxiety. My wife shared with me a phone conversation she had with her mother about Catholicism again and I have limited patience for this divisive topic in our family anymore. Why is this so difficult? In planning our trip to her sister's Catholic wedding, her mother asked, "how will you feel about not being able to take the Eucharist at the wedding?" She is also concerned about this wedding being approved because the Best-man is not Catholic and my wife, the Maid-of-honor, is now attending my Protestant church. I am embarrassed for the last time and will no longer shield myself in isolation from this subject. I must now express my thoughts on paper.

Let me describe the experiences I've had which have given me the impression of disapproval for my Protestant Christian upbringing. I must recognize my mother-in-law, who loves the Catholic faith so much that she can't avoid casting her personal bias on matters of religion around me. Her well-intended pursuit to share the Catholic faith with me to unify our family has been received as exclusive, condescending and I have been driven to finally state my intentions for our family. Why can't I find a Catholic who knows how to explain these alledged doctrinal truths of the Catholic faith? Unlike the principles that helped shape America that "All men are created equal under God", the theology behind many of the Catholic positions is not "self evident" to me. I need to know the truth before I can believe it and "the truth will set me free" as scripture teaches. My mind is curious and needs to know before my heart can be opened.

These words I have tonight amount to nothing more than personal venting at the possible expense of a healthy relationship with my loving in-laws. No longer will I attempt to combine the similarities between Presbyterians and Catholics participating at their Mass on Sundays when visiting. From this moment, my family will attend a Presbyterian church on Sunday whether in their hometown or mine. It is now obvious to me that something is wrong when I am relieved to hear tonight that my in-laws, who I love very much, were not going to visit this year for Christmas. When Christians around the world are celebrating the birth of Jesus Christ, our mutual Savior, I'm thankful that I can celebrate in my Presbyterian church with my parents and will not worry about being an "outsider".

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Now, do you think after this declaration, I was ready for Catholicism to penetrate the shield built around my heart? As fate would have it, attempts to unify the house on one church would become more complicated as we found out that my wife was pregnant with our first child. Would our baby be baptized in a Catholic church or Protestant? We both believed a religious identity would matter to our God-given children and a "church home" would give them roots and a connection. When I prayed the Lord's prayer, I

would contemplate the words “thy will be done on earth...” but couldn’t discern God’s will for us.

My prayers for guidance from the Holy Spirit were answered when I found out my company was transferring our family to the South. Wow! We’re going to the “Bible belt”, away from my Catholic neighbors here in the North, and back to my family roots who were all Protestant Christians. These were cousins who were active in the church communities, and didn’t mind crediting “the good Lord” when talking about our proud family. Also, both my brother and sister married former Catholics who had no problem attending Protestant churches. What’s the big deal? We moved, joined a Presbyterian church and became active with our new church family and I really embraced this new life.

Now do you think I was listening to the ancient bells of Catholicism? Not a chance.

But then it happened. My wife, who thus far supported my faith journey with a desire to keep the family together on Sundays, finally broke down. In our new southern “bible belt” neighborhood, she met a large number of Catholic women! She joined a Rosary group for faith sharing with other Catholic mothers and became reconnected to her background. I was surprised to find so many Catholics in Georgia and wasn’t sure about this “ask Mary to pray for us” and felt it was another example of some ritual “outside the Bible” that Catholics made up. After a few months of rewarding fellowship with these neighbors, my wife shared her desire to have our son raised Catholic. I guess I never appreciated the significance of a “First Communion” and didn’t understand why the Presbyterians, whom she agreed were wonderful to us, didn’t fulfill all of our family church needs for her. After careful consideration, our ultimate “family first” opinion won out and I agreed to conditionally join the nearby Catholic parish because I made it clear to her that I PERSONALLY WOULD NOT CONVERT TO BE CATHOLIC.

After our second son was baptized in the Catholic church, and I became more comfortable, I realized that something was still not right. Although I was going through the motions, and my heart was someplace else. I decided to start reading books on the Protestant Reformation and tried to understand the denominations of Christianity and why there were so many churches outside of Catholicism. The books I discovered were written to clarify Protestant positions against Rome, and I became confused but justified in my decision to remain outside “the church” even though I sat on the inside.

Then, my watershed moment that led to epiphany for me occurred while we were on vacation for Easter, 2001. I was on an early morning run along the beach at sunrise, which I often did to “sort things out” and prayed that day for God to send me a sign to know what to do. Does church even matter to a family? If there is only one true God, and he became man through Jesus Christ just one time, then why is there such conflict

within his church? Who is right? Why would the Holy Spirit inspire people who believe in Jesus allow divisions over matters of truth on earth? What is true? Which church would Jesus attend if he reappeared as a man? Does any of this matter?

The answer I received was clear and unyielding from God. There were two messages; first, God accepted my family because we cared so much to seek His way, and second, do not seek the truth to life's questions from biased sources. I needed to separate the internal family pressures from this and seek the best outcome on my own, and then remove the biased material I had been feeding myself because it divides my heart. I also needed a stronger prayer life and someday I'll see the best Christian church for us reveal itself among the confusion.

Shortly after we returned, my wife brought home a flier on a former Presbyterian Minister, Gerry Matatics, speaking on Catholicism at the library ON THE CORNER OF OUR NEIGHBORHOOD. Holy Spirit or just coincidence? He was a biblical Greek and Hebrew scholar, a Doctorate in Theology and the Founder CEO of Biblical Foundations International, an organization dedicated to the biblical basis supporting Catholic doctrines from the early church fathers. Obviously, I felt compelled to go hear him speak and I was hoping to show him this anti-Catholic literature I had been studying, and find out what made him, a devout anti-Catholic Calvinist student and minister convert.

It was April 24, 2001, when I had my "Protesting Protestant" guard lowered forever. He took every one of my objections and neutralized them in a very prayerful and ecumenical way. Before his lecture, he asked everyone to pray that the Holy Spirit would dwell there and shine the light of truth to all who were willing to listen. Once he began, I was rushed with a sense of peace that I couldn't explain and put down my anti-Catholic books that I brought as reference tools under my seat. He was speaking directly to me on matters of faith from an early Apostolic Christian view through the Protestant movements away from the church. I never saw Christianity offered in context to the original deposit of faith laid down from Jesus through the early church fathers. I was left with no room but to study the faith of the early church in comparison to the intent of the Protestant movements from 1517 to the doctrinal confusion of the present day. I came to realize and appreciate the fullness of the Christian faith spoken in the Scriptures but also protected in truth to the modern era through the church herself through Vatican II. I was embarrassed that I had fed myself with partial Gospel accounts that conveniently fit certain theologies against Rome. I then committed to study scripture and teachings in context to the original council decisions of the early church.

After driving home that night at 2:30AM and realizing that my "epiphany moment" had just occurred, I could hardly wait to wake up the next day and explore the Christian faith into areas previously considered "out of bounds" for Protestants. At least I knew that wherever this journey would take me, it would not be without significant discernment and a desire to search for the truth. Now, in the grip of history and a fuller

understanding of the church Jesus initiated here on earth, guided by the Holy Spirit, I began extensive study.

A few months went by and I was very close to committing to the church when scandals broke within the Priesthood. I sat in my car one night before driving home from Nashville, and listened to the radio about what was occurring around the country. I was depressed. How could this be happening as I was sure this Church was the true deposit of Christian faith on earth protected by the Apostolic succession?

That's when I knew all signs led to Rome for me. As I was going to drive home the usual way across I24 to I75 through Chattanooga, the highway was blocked with a massive car pile-up thus I was forced to drive I65 through Birmingham to I20 Atlanta. It would be the long way home but worth it for me. With the radio off now and driving through Alabama, I decided to pray for the Priesthood believing that the "good men" who took a pledge of poverty just to preach the Gospel needed help. It was then I noticed a small sign that I had never seen before on this route that read, "Shrine of the Blessed Sacrament" turn here. I wondered if it was The Shriners? I didn't think it could be affiliated with the many Baptist churches in the area, so I turned in. As I drove for miles in the country following little white crosses along the way, I saw various Catholic signs in front me on the Blessed Mother and various Saints. I couldn't believe my eyes when I came over the hill to a massive Cathedral Monastery that appeared to me like an oasis in the middle of nowhere. I pulled up, and was greeted by a young monk who asked me if he could help. After sharing my interest with him in the Catholic Church he offered to give me his last personally guided tour of the day. Here I sat, a Protestant, praying among Sisters of Mother Angelica's convent in front of the most beautiful decorated Alter I could ever imagine with a Monk waiting for me. He explained the Apostolic Succession of Popes and Bishops, initiated by Jesus himself, and spoke the truth guided by the Holy Spirit.

Now I'm here, with a Christ candle in hand, Easter Vigil 2002 being accepted into the Catholic Church of my forefathers. I'm thinking of St. Paul and his conversion on the road to Damascus. I feel connected to St. Thomas, who doubted the presence of Jesus after the resurrection when Jesus returned to give the disciples the gifts of the Holy Spirit for Pentecost. I wonder how much regret he had and if he only knew how many people would identify with him in questioning matters of faith. I wonder if I will regret my dubious curiosity that led me to confuse many Catholics over their faith with my challenging assertions. But I'm also in-line now with the early church fathers, who made key decisions to set up the one Holy Apostolic Church, the Catholic doctrines and who wrote the Bible. Finally, all the Catholic Christian brothers and sisters that have kept the "keys of the kingdom" given to St. Peter by Jesus and have protected these truths from error since God dwelt among us in Christ. I'm thankful for my mother-in-law, for her prayers. But mostly to my wife, for being my loving support system during our long journey together. Our family is now one in faith, and one in practice thanks be to God.

