

The Coming Home Network *International*

P. O. Box 8290 • Zanesville, OH 43702-8290

jim@chnetwork.org

Coming home A minister encounters Mary

**By Lou Baldwin
Special to the CS&T**

In October, Rev. Neil Babcox, pastor of Disston Memorial Presbyterian Church in the Tacony section of Philadelphia had to perform one of the most difficult tasks of his life. Of all of the congregations he had led this was the flock that touched him most; he didn't want to hurt them. He had to tell them he was resigning his pulpit because he was becoming a Catholic.

It was hard for them to absorb, but they were loving and accepting, and so was the denomination, he recalls.

Long before telling the congregation, Babcox shared his feeling with his wife, Emilie, his college sweetheart whom he married in 1972. She, too, was supportive with misgivings as were their three grown children, Erin, Christopher and Timothy. Emilie remains a committed Presbyterian, with no intentions of becoming Catholic, and there were practical concerns for both of them. She has a successful career; being a minister was his livelihood and a way of life. What would happen to his pension? What would he do for a living? Where would they live? If Neil and Emilie had trepidations, they are quite understandable.

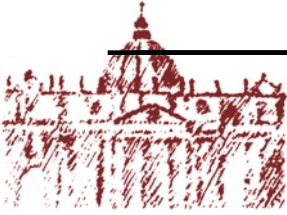
In any case, Babcox, 54, ruefully quotes Cardinal John Henry Newman, perhaps the most famous convert to Catholicism from Protestantism in all of history; Middle age is a bad time to convert.

That doesn't mean Babcox has second thoughts. It's been a long journey but one, in conscience, he had to make.

For him, life began with a spiritually blank slate.

Born in Illinois and baptized generic Protestant, his was a family which really had no religion. It was strange in a way his father was a coroner, and on his mother's side the family was in the mortuary business. Surrounded by death, yet there was no religious context.

He went off to Southern Illinois University in 1970 and it was here he began dating Emilie, whom he knew from high school. They were both drawn into a lively Christian movement on the campus. It was a time when I was searching and seeking, and this was when I decided to give my



The Coming Home Network *International*

P. O. Box 8290 • Zanesville, OH 43702-8290

jim@chnetwork.org

life to Christ, Babcox said.

It was Christianity in a nondenominational way, but nevertheless enthusiastic. He and his friends formed their own little independent church, even partaking in street evangelization. He became active for a time in the Charismatic movement.

Babcox took his degree in philosophy and religious studies, and continued on for graduate studies at Princeton Theological Seminary. Eventually, he obtained his doctorate in ministry from Pittsburgh Theological Seminary.

Seeking a more structured form of Protestantism, he was formally ordained to ministry in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) in 1986. This was followed by a series of pastorships, in New Jersey and Pennsylvania, and, most recently, at Disston Memorial, where he served for three years.

But for almost this entire period, Babcox was experiencing a growing awareness of, and affinity to, Catholicism.

The reasons were many. Even in his pre-Presbyterian days he was a strong supporter of the pro-life movement, in agreement with the encyclical *Humanae Vitae* and an admirer of John Paul II, especially because of his stand on life issues.

He became drawn to the great Catholic mystics and writers. Francis de Sales, Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross represented the spiritual riches and treasures found in Catholicism.

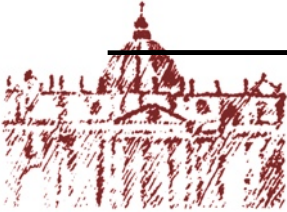
Through his readings he fell in love with the Liturgy of the Hours and made this a daily ritual. Beginning 15 years ago, he began making annual retreats to the Trappist Monastery of Genesee, New York.

It was during his first visit at the late evening Compline service which was to his ears the most beautiful lullaby imaginable that the seed of his conversion was planted. As Compline ended, the lights of the chapel were extinguished, save for one highlighting the icon of the Blessed Virgin. All sang the beautiful *Salve Regina*.

I was touched by the Virgin Mary. Most Protestant converts say Catholic devotion to Mary was their greatest hurdle. For me, it wouldn't have happened without Mary, Babcox said.

His personal road to Rome was still quite long and there were many steps along the way.

He discovered the rosary and began to recite it. By custom, a silent Hail Mary became his last words at night. That was rather strange for a Presbyterian minister, Babcox admits.



The Coming Home Network *International*

P. O. Box 8290 • Zanesville, OH 43702-8290

jim@chnetwork.org

He was drawn into the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius under the direction of a Sister of St. Joseph.

He read Catholic apologetics, including the writings of the great converts Chesterton, Merton, Newman, and after accepting a pulpit in Philadelphia he began to drop in at the Eucharistic Adoration chapels at St. Dominic and St. Katherine of Siena churches, again an unusual custom for someone who never experienced Eucharist.

It became clear to me the spiritual life cannot be separated from the sacraments and the Eucharist, Babcox said. Along the way, he also began to visit the Carmelite Monastery on Old York Road where he was encouraged by Mother Pia. The Carmelites are the Green Berets of prayer, he said.

Up on Roosevelt Boulevard he frequented the Pauline Books and Media Center, a resource for his spiritual reading. On an early visit he confided to Pauline Sister Cynthia Guza that he was devoted to Mary, but wasn't Catholic.

That is a great gift, she told him.

Babcox seemed to be touched by this, he hadn't thought of himself as gifted in this way. He became a fast friend of Sister Cynthia and the other Daughters of St. Paul who staff the bookstore.

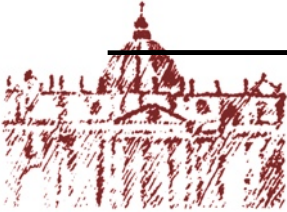
It was rewarding to see a person on his way to God at that point he didn't know how it would work out, Sister Cynthia said. We try to be respectful of the person, to help them, but it's up to God. We don't know where they are on their spiritual journey. In his case I knew [conversion] was coming it was a matter of time.

It wasn't long after this that Babcox came in contact with Father Shaun Mahoney, Newman Club director at Temple University who serves as a liaison between the Archdiocese of Philadelphia and ministers who are considering entry into the Catholic Church.

He was extremely enthusiastic with an intense theological interest, but yet with a profound humility, Father Mahoney said. It struck me how openly he embraced the practice of the faith he had found.

Father Mahoney became another companion during Babcox's long journey, as he was torn between his real desire for the Catholic faith, and knowing his embrace of it would alter his life in so many complex ways.

Babcox made his ultimate decision, he would be Catholic, on All Saints Day, 2005.



The Coming Home Network *International*

P. O. Box 8290 • Zanesville, OH 43702-8290

jim@chnetwork.org

He confided his intention to his family, to all of those who assisted him on the journey and to Cardinal Justin Rigali. He also confided his intention to a sympathetic member of his Presbyterian congregation who eased one of his greatest worries future employment. Through him he was put in touch with a priest in New Jersey, who arranged a meeting with Bishop Joseph Galante, of Camden. Bishop Galante agreed to give Babcox, who is living in Westmont, N.J. with his wife, a position in lay ministry as associate director of the Newman Club at the Richard Stockton College near Atlantic City.

On Nov. 1, again All Saints Day, before a small gathering of family and friends at the Cathedral Basilica of SS. Peter and Paul, Neil Babcox was formally received into the Catholic Church. Also present in a show of support were Presbyterian and Episcopalian clergy friends and members of the Tacony Ministerium Father John Farry of St. Leo Parish, Rev. Kay Braun of St. Petri-Hope Lutheran Church, Rev. William Stone of St. Stephens United Church of Christ and Rev. Arthur Johnson of Tacony Baptist Church.

Baptism was unnecessary, but Father Mahoney administered the sacrament of confirmation and for the first time, Neil Babcox, now formally a Catholic layman, received holy Communion. Sister Cynthia was his sponsor at confirmation, a first for her in 35 years in the convent.

At confirmation Neil Babcox became Neil Patrick Mary Babcox. Taking the Confirmation name of Mary is unusual for a male in America, but it was very fitting.

Previously, at a Temple Newman program Neil Babcox summed up his devotion to the Holy Virgin through the words of St. Elizabeth, Who am I that the mother of the Lord should come to me?