

“Falling Out, Coming Out, and Coming Home”

My Personal Journey Back to the Catholic Faith

***By
Richard G Evans***

1-Falling Out

On the night of Christmas in 1955, while the rest of the Catholic world was singing the “Gloria” at Midnight Mass, my mother Mary Evans (yes, Mary!) was giving birth to me, her 8th and youngest child. I grew up, first on a farm and later in a small town, where, although the money was not plentiful, the Rosaries and prayer books were, and I cannot recall a time when I was not aware of God in my life.

While other little boys were planning to be firefighters or police when asked, I often said, even at ages 7 or 8, “I want to be the Pope”! Not long after my 1st Communion, I jumped at the chance to become an altar boy, having already had much practice as the family “priest” when we as kids used to play “Mass”—complete, at times, with flattened “hosts” made of white bread and cut out with bottle caps! The idea of actually serving next to the priest at the *real* Mass was incredible to me, and I did so with joy for the next 4 years, generally walking the long mile of country highway by myself on the weeks I served, even at 9 years of age. By the time we moved to the small town of Princeton MN where I eventually grew up, I recall vividly one of the local nuns in our parish, Sister Mary Conrad, calling me the “little priest”, and telling me to listen to that “little voice” within me. I knew she sensed a calling, and to this day I wonder what my life may have been if that calling had been fully pursued.

When I was around 11, my mother, who had actually assisted in the conversion of my father to Catholicism at age 19 when they were married, underwent a “crisis of faith”. By that time it was the late 1960’s, and both the nation and some in the Church had become radical in many ways. Vatican II had just ended, the sexual revolution was going strong, and the Church began to more publicly admit the mistakes She had made through the years, such as the selling of indulgences (which led quite directly to Martin Luther’s “95 Theses” and the Protestant Reformation), and my mother’s confidence in the one institution she trusted most was shaken to the core. She began visiting a number of local churches, and over time “settled in” at the local Assemblies of God (or A/G for short). I remember telling her that I was afraid for her soul, a *bit* bold for a 6th grader, I guess, but in the course of time found myself visiting services with her, at least occasionally.

I had purchased a Bible (a Protestant RSV edition) from another of our Catholic sisters who sold them to interested Catechism students for \$1.00, and I began reading this mysterious book. It did not escape my notice that the very kind A/G people read and used their Bible at every service and

seemed to know the contents of it well. Even those in the youth group, to a person, were living their faith seriously on a daily basis. An impressive example of this happened when a young girl fell and hurt herself at one of their activities, and the youth leader, who was one of the pastor's sons and in 11th grade at the time, stopped everything and had us all pray for her immediately! In all of my years as a Catholic I had never seen the faith practiced in such a personal way, and I was rightly impressed. Soon I found myself attending very regularly, and the "calling" I once sensed to possible priesthood became directed towards evangelical ministry.

Around this time (I was 14 by then), I had my own "faith crisis", and began questioning all I had ever been taught, both Catholic and Protestant, finally one day just going to a quiet corner of the house and telling God that I didn't really care if I was Catholic, Protestant, or Buddhist, but just wanted to know who He was and to serve Him. A few weeks later, after one of the Sunday evening services at the A/G, which I now went to almost exclusively, the pastor prayed with me to "accept Jesus", and I did so eagerly. While no thunderbolts exploded in the sky, deep within my spirit I knew that Christ was real, and that I wished to follow Him for the rest of my life.

2-Coming Out

Having hit puberty and all of its accompanying hormones, I realized I had some desires that most other boys my age didn't seem to share—while they talked excitedly about girls and football, I found myself having "crushes" on some of the other young men in our church and school. I had noticed these feelings years earlier, however being raised in a home where sex (while obviously practiced, given the fact that I had 7 siblings!) was never once discussed in my growing up years, I did not know what they were called or why I had them, and had no one I could ask either. Only at age 11 while reading an issue of *LOOK* magazine on "The American Man" did I put a name to my desires—was I a "homosexual"? I did not know, but suspected I was, and moreover knew it was something I could tell no one—period. . It is undeniably very lonely to have such a "secret" at that young age, and shortly after my experience at the Assemblies of God church 3 years later I came to believe that this indeed was, from a Biblical standpoint, sinful behavior.

I learned early on, when those thoughts and temptations would come to me, to *very* quickly replace them in my mind with prayer, Scripture and the like, confess them to God and just move forward. I did not identify myself as "gay", to myself or to others, and after graduating went on to attend an A/G Bible College, remaining in fact a virgin until I was married at age 23 to a very sincere and caring Christian woman. But the feelings were there, and even after 12 years of licensed ministry and marriage they remained a strong and disturbing temptation for me.

Early in 1991, I decided to "revisit" all of the Scripture passages on homosexuality and see if there was something I had not understood correctly. It was not my desire to "go out and sin", but I very deeply and sincerely wished to know if there was an avenue I had missed. I studied each verse, using all of the tools at my disposal at the time, such as Greek and Hebrew lexicons, a number of volumes written with both traditional theology and others which were "pro-gay" in their approach, and eventually concluded, after months of study, prayer, and even fasting, that the Bible was just not

as clear on the topic as I had once believed it to be. Because I could not seem to find unambiguous answers in the “Bible alone”, and since I rejected the concept of Sacred Tradition at that time, I based my subsequent conclusions on science, current thinking in psychology, and the “lived experiences” of others. *All* of these seemed to point towards acceptance and embracement of my “gayness”, and that is what I did. My marriage soon ended, and for the next 15 years, though still loving God in my own way, I lived what is commonly called the “gay lifestyle”.

I spent much of the next several years “floundering”, attending a variety of churches and for some years no church at all. I still was looking for God, but it seemed my “Bible only” foundation had crumbled too by that time, and I explored many alternative forms of spirituality, such as occult practices and New Age philosophy. While I still believed on some level, and my “God hunger” had never really ceased, I was walking far in every way from the faith of my childhood.

The long journey back to Faith began when I started attending a local Methodist church in the area that was both accepting and yet very evangelical. They were certainly not “pro-gay” by any means, but were very loving and charitable, and I began digging once again into the Scriptures on a regular basis. I also found myself celibate, at first not by choice but eventually embracing it, yet on the other hand still holding on for dear life to my “pro-gay theology”. Go figure.

3-Coming Home

In Lent of 2004 I saw a movie of epic proportions which awakened something deep within. It was called “The Passion of the Christ”, and a hunger for the Jesus of my early days was stirred inside me in ways I even yet cannot pinpoint or describe fully. By now I was daily listening to Christian talk radio (Protestant, of course!) and heard announcers and others questioning the faith of Jim Caviezel and Mel Gibson simply “because they were Catholic”. This incensed me, as I had all my life known many Catholics who loved God with all of their hearts, and, unlike many evangelicals, I had never gotten caught up in an anti-Catholic attitude as a result. I had fond memories of the Catholic Church, and although no longer fully espousing Her theology, I knew what I was hearing on the dial was simply not true or accurate. It became worse when one of my very favorite radio Bible expositors, just after the death of Pope John Paul II, publicly declared him to “be in hell”—with his congregation chuckling as he sickly joked about it. Unkind bigotry such as that was beginning to leave this (at that time) “pro-gay Christian” both frustrated and infuriated.

Early in 2005, while attending and supporting a “gay marriage” rally at the Minnesota State Capitol, I found myself walking away when the leader of the most prominent GLBT (gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender) lobbying group in the state began to rail against those who believed the Bible, while at the same time asking all of the clergy present to come forward and stand with her as she did so. In other words, the “gay” agenda had swung from asking for true tolerance, which I still believe in, to a nearly *forced acceptance* of their interpretations including everything from the secular law to the Sacred Scriptures! It tore me apart inside to have to choose between two “worlds” I belonged to, that of “Bible believing Christians” and those living with homosexual inclinations—but at that moment the line was drawn in the sand. I began to realize the dangers of a societal change that could literally force churches to perform same sex unions, and to attempt to silence, as has certainly

happened in Canada, a number of sincere Protestant ministers and Catholic bishops from speaking out against what they truly believed was sinful behavior. Even in my “gay activist” years I knew that this was not tolerance, and I had always known, if it ever came to choosing between God and a lifestyle that was “for this life only”, I would need to follow Him, no matter where it lead me. I left that gathering feeling like a “man without a country”, not fully on board with the Church or the “gay radicals” I was listening to. I only knew that I loved the Lord Jesus Christ *and* loved my homosexually inclined brothers and sisters, and that both groups seemed to very nearly hate each other.

Having become an Amazon.com “junkie” by this time, I did some searching and found a book by the name of “Beyond Gay” by David Morrison. In reading his story, I found some amazing parallels with my own, as he was also a “gay activist” who came back to Christ through a very caring and accepting evangelical church, and who now believed in a concept I had never heard of, either in the church or “gay” world. He described, as does the Catholic Church, homosexuality in terms of “same sex attraction”, or SSA, and suggested that, rather than concentrating on being “cured”, our main goal should be holiness—which meant celibacy and lifelong chastity. He didn’t deny the possibility of being supernaturally delivered from homosexuality either, but did not make it his main focus, and he had become—you guessed it—*Catholic* during his search for wholeness, now working extensively with a Catholic based ministry by the name of *Courage*, which is a Church approved support organization for those with SSA. I was finally a “man with a country” once again, and was surprised and hopeful at his “middle of the road” and sane approach to a matter which was literally tearing me in two by this time.

That same summer, another seemingly “unrelated” series of convergences began to propel me towards the Church, pushing me in the door at last. During the 1950s, a group of evangelical Protestant missionaries were in Ecuador, and 5 young men in their 20s and 30s were martyred by an obscure but very violent tribe who they were trying to reach with the Gospel. One of them, Jim Elliott, had writings later published by his widow, Elisabeth. This story had gripped me deeply as a teen and now I found myself reading extensively about it once again, as this was nearing the 50th anniversary of their deaths. Mrs. Elliott and Rachel Saint, the sister of another of the martyrs, Nate Saint, had actually later gone in and lived with the very tribe who killed their husband and brother, and nearly the whole tribe was within 2 years converted in what can only be described as a series of miracles. I found myself revitalized again with a whole new hunger to serve Christ and do whatever He wished for my life, and in the process of my studies quite “accidentally” learned that Elisabeth Elliot’s brother, Dr. Thomas Howard, former chief editor of “Christianity Today” magazine and therefore a noted leading Protestant in his own right, had *too* become a Catholic! At first disturbing me, I soon became curious about why someone from such an amazing evangelical family would “jump ship”, and decided to find out what would make him do so.

By this point I had gotten my fill of old school Christian talk radio, especially amid all of the anti-Catholic sentiments so often expressed, and shocked even myself by deciding to watch a bit of Catholic television (EWTN) instead, just to see what was really offered there. I was pleasantly surprised to hear very little of the type of bigotry I had been listening to and was amazed at the level

of kindness and respect shown to everyone, friend or foe, while still taking very definite traditional Catholic stances. I particularly loved a certain nun who vaguely reminded me of Sister Mary Conrad, the one who used to call me the “little priest” nearly 40 years earlier, and found myself hooked on “Mother Angelica Live”! But now I was becoming challenged inwardly—I started watching the Mass, almost daily, and began to regularly view a program called “The Journey Home” (discovering later that Dr. Thomas Howard was their very first guest!), plus becoming aware through them of Dr. Scott Hahn and other Protestant ministers who had come into the Church during the 35 years I was away. Further, I learned that there was a recently updated *Catechism of the Catholic Church* and purchased a copy immediately. Digging into it, literally Bible in one hand and Catechism in the other, it slowly dawned on me that, unlike what I had been led to believe over my many years as a practicing Protestant, the Catholic Church did in actuality teach Christianity correctly “from the top”, so to speak. This was brought home to me even more by reading books such as “Born Fundamentalist, Born Again Catholic” by David Currie, another former Protestant minister, and a number of others besides. As mentioned, I had always believed that there were Catholic Christians, but I had naively assumed that this was in spite of Rome, not because of her. Now I realized I had been wrong on this point for my *entire adult life*! Although not yet ready to be Catholic again for myself, I at least had to acknowledge that it was within the realm of possibility to be “called into Catholicism”, as Scott Hahn believed he had been. I was definitely intrigued.

The final thing that happened after this rapid fire synchronicity of occurrences was reading Scott and his wife Kimberly Hahn’s book “Rome Sweet Home”, in which they chronicle their own struggles and journeying from Protestant to Catholic. Although I recall nearly throwing the book across the room at least 3 times during my reading of it, (mostly because of having so many of my *own* dearly held beliefs of over 30 years literally overturned page by page!), I ended up devouring it nearly in one sitting, suddenly stunned with the quiet but definite conviction that I needed to return to the Church—and soon.

Early morning just a day or two later, I walked nearly a mile in the pouring rain (talk about a throwback to my childhood!) to the morning Mass at St Olaf’s Catholic Church, a local parish located in downtown Minneapolis, and for the first time in 35 years went to the Sacraments of Reconciliation (Confession) and the Eucharist (Holy Communion). I arrived late, was soaking wet from the walk, interrupted the poor priest during absolution, and could not remember the Act of Contrition at all! But back I was, and have been ever since. This was on October 4, 2005, and was not only the Memorial of St. Francis of Assisi, (who, like me, had a somewhat “checkered past”), but in addition Rosh Hashanah (the Jewish New Year), a celebration symbolizing in Judaism *new beginnings*. And for me it was indeed a new start. Many questions remained, and I was halfway through the 7 month RCIA process (Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults, a series of adult catechism classes for those wishing to become Catholic or return to the Church) before removing my GLBT Rainbow flag from the window where it had hung proudly for years. But I was home, and received the Sacrament of Confirmation during the Easter Vigil Mass on April 15, 2006. I took the name Stephen Francis, and was confirmed by the same priest (Father Mark Pavlik) who had heard my confession on that wet and rainy day months earlier. My family and friends even held a

“50 and Catholic” celebration for me that day, having reached the half century mark the previous December.

One last amazing set of circumstances, totally unplanned, gave me that “extra boost” to substantiate that I had moved in the right direction. The *same week* I returned to the Church, there was a huge Eucharistic Congress in town, and I actually met in person both Dr. Scott Hahn and Jim Caviezel, two of my biggest influences in my return to the Catholic Faith, after hearing them speak there. One short week later, at a different conference, I then met the son of Nate Saint, one of the martyred missionaries whose lives and deaths led me to Dr. Thomas Howard and EWTN! Only God could have planned and converged all of these together as He did. As I write this I am sponsoring, for the 2nd year in a row, a candidate for RCIA, and am now an Extraordinary Minister of Holy Communion, both at my parish and as a volunteer on my job. And I am really “home at last”.

The poem that follows, although not a direct part of my own “faith journey”, was penned by my late mother, Mary Elizabeth Evans (1922-1991), upon her own return to the Church on August 20, 1970. While one day reading it again many years later, I realized that I, too, could have written this as my own experience. In it also I recognize her prayers for me were, without a doubt, a significant part of my own path back to Rome. Pray for us, and rest in peace, Mary Evans!

**This morning I knelt
As my soul sought release,
I heard Jesus’ Voice
In the words of the priest-**

**How I longed to go back
To the Church I had known,
Within Her still walls
To kneel and atone-**

**I thought I could leave her
My Mother disclaim,
Forget that she loved me
And called me by name-**

**Oh the scenes I remember
Within Her sweet fold,
The farewells to loved ones
The memories I hold-**

The times that I knelt
At the altar and prayed,
The joy of Communion
The vows that I made-

I ne'er could forget Her
The Church of my youth,
Too long have I loved her,
Her beauty and Truth-

Tho far did I wander
From her in my pride,
In longing, my spirit
With her did abide-

This morning I knelt
To pray and atone,
My heart filled with joy
At last I was Home!

HOME AT LAST!!!



***The moment of my Confirmation, April 15, 2006, at St Olaf Catholic Church,
Minneapolis, MN***

If you have any questions, comments, or just wish to know more about the Catholic Faith, please feel free to contact me. I certainly do not claim to know “all the answers”, but I will do my best to find them out if you ask. May the Lord Jesus Christ and His and our Blessed Mother guide you on your own “journey home”! God bless.

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