

Journey Home Conversion Story
Rob Evans
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One day, on a bank application, my wife wrote that my ‘form of employment’ was that of a “Singing Plumber”. To me, that conjures an image of a man in a tuxedo, cleaning drains as he sings opera. I *do* sing, not opera, but Christian songs to kids under the name, “The Donut Man”, because I end every concert by ‘repairing’ the hole in a donut to remind everyone that God sends His love to fill up the empty place in our hearts.

Both sides of my brain. I tell you this to let you know, that *both* sides of my brain, the musician and the plumber, had to be convinced to become Catholic. You’ve heard from the scholars, theologians, and educators on the “Journey Home”, now it’s time to find out why a blue-collar, ex-hippy, musician-type like me would “Cross the Tiber”. First, some instructions are needed.

Plumbing rules and tools: To be a plumber, I had to master some very practical things. Such as: Sewage runs down-hill. Cold water is on the right, hot is on the left. Pay-day is on Friday. *And don’t chew your fingernails.* And... *tools.* Listen, plumbers have tools for their *tools!* We’ve got ‘goes-inta’ tools and ‘goes-outta’ tools. Twisting, cutting, cleaning, bending, burning, gluing tools, and of course, we always want *more* tools. Why? *‘Cause we’ve got a job to do!* Truly successful plumbers have to find the shortest, straightest line between two points and run their pipe accordingly. Water comes down the tower, through the main, into the house, and out the tap. In order to work, it all has to be connected to bring refreshment and cleansing to the occupants, and then safely conduct the waste to where it can be appropriately handled. Just think of the diseases that plague cultures that don’t do it! If you’re not really excited by my story yet, hang in there. Because if good plumbing is important in the natural realm, think of how much more important it is in the spiritual!

‘Spiritual Plumbing’ is something I think the Catholic Church does remarkably well. Not that my Protestant experience was sorely amiss, but it was just not employing all of the ‘tools’ Christ has supplied, especially on the issue of dealing thoroughly and appropriately with sewage.... I mean, *sin.*

In with the good, Out with the bad. Both groups agree that all sin is pardoned by Christ’s finished act on Calvary, but many Protestants tend to consider Baptism as only a symbolic act. Whereas Catholics embrace and employ the promise found in I Peter 3:21, that “Baptism... now saves you...” The sacrament of baptism actually sets us apart to God, and as a daily reminder, we can bless ourselves with Holy Water, and re-appropriate by faith, the power of our baptism every time we walk through the doors of the church. *That is good plumbing.* And, it gets better.

A Protestant is far more on his own when it comes to confessing sin within the church. In all of my years of support groups, small groups, venting groups, and spiritual-help groups, I never, *ever*, had anyone look me in the eye and say unequivocally, “Through the ministry of the Church, may God give you pardon and peace, and *I* absolve you from your sins in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit”.

That is what a Catholic priest says to us when he administers the Sacrament of Reconciliation. (Ahhh. What a wonderful sounding *‘flush’* that makes!)

Connected. Plumbing systems don’t work if they are not connected! *Duh.* Yet the Catholic Church is the only church that sees the *‘Apostolic-connection’* as a *must*. Apostolic succession, Holy Orders, is found in the *Roman Catholic Church* because before Peter died in *Rome*, he handed-off the Church to the next guy... and that guy to the next guy, and then the next guy, and so on. If you think about it, that priest who hands you the bread and the wine of the Eucharist is ‘piping-it-in’ all the way back to Peter, Jesus and the first Eucharist! This is a marvelous, miraculous, historical connection! (More about the Eucharist later.)

Plumber’s Key: Most plumbers carry a shut-off key in their truck. It has a “T” handle with a long stem that goes way down into the street to access the supply to your house. Let me tell you, when you need *that* key, you *really need it!* Therefore, I appreciate the keys that Jesus gave to Peter in order to operate this ‘supply and waste’ system otherwise known as the Catholic Church! Protestants believe that Peter took the keys with him to the grave. The Catholic Church does *not*. (Check out the first chapter of Acts where the disciples gave Judas’ empty *office* to Matthias.) Point is, the pre-eminent office of Peter still functions today, with a wonderful teacher named Joseph Ratzinger, otherwise known as Pope Benedict XVI, keeping an eye on those incredible keys!

Rust. Now of course, in a system this old, you might find some rust in the pipes. But anything else 2000 years old would have shut down a long time ago if God wasn’t in it. I used to be “put-off” by the traditional liturgy, the pomp and circumstance of the Catholic Church. Some of the its’style strikes me as a bit ‘rusty’. But as a plumber, if you told me that the first water mains here in Philly were made of plastic, I would know you are no plumber! Did you know that the first water mains that Ben Franklin and company set in the ground were hollowed-out logs? I’ve seen some in the museums around town. In front of the display, the ‘plumber-in-me’ calls my family over to admire what I find to be so exciting,

“Wow, look at this hollowed-out log with metal bands on the ends!”, and my kids pat me on the shoulder and say,

“That’s nice, Dad”.

I recognize an original when I see one. They see a log. I see this old wooden pipe as a seminal invention, obviously the real-McCoy. So too, do I now see Catholic ritual and liturgy. Yes, it can be tedious, culturally-speaking, “Not modern”, to say the least, but if you are looking for the real, *historical* Church that Jesus handed off to Peter and the disciples, wouldn't you expect something 2000 years old to look and act a bit oddly? A bit anachronistic, perhaps? But when we do encounter ‘rust’, (and we will), let us pray for the fresh water of the Holy Spirit to cleanse every bit of corrosion from the vital function of the Catholic Church today!

Now from the other side of my brain. I'm a musician, a singer, a song writer, poet... dreamer. I love a good story, **and can recognize when a story is fully realized or not.** As the “Donut Man”, I have sung Bible stories from the first-person perspective with great effect. “Daniel in the Lion's Den” is sung by the lion. The “Parable of the Mustard Seed” is sung by the mustard seed, and so on. This ‘first-person’ style of story-telling has allowed me to view things from a fresh perspective. For thirty five years now, my life has been rocked by the greatest story of all: and that of course, is the story of the Messiah, Jesus Christ. When I was introduced to Jesus at the Gospel Temple of Philadelphia by Pastor Dennis Corrigan, in 1972, it was accompanied with Dennis' personal attention and discipleship as we sought to apply God's word and promises to my life. I remember Dennis exhorting me to allow God to address my need for what he called the “Three ‘M's’ of life; *master, mate and mission.*”

“Jesus is your master”, he said. “Now, let's pray about the other two”.

The Prayers of the Saints: There began a long-standing prayer relationship with Jesus and me. As I prayed, and as we worshipped later with our worship band in church, the overhead projecting the words upon the wall, I closed my eyes and imagined Christ on the Cross, Christ rising from the dead, and Christ now on a marvelous chair there in His throne-room. I must tell you, though, over the years, as I considered the “manifold witnesses” surrounding us there as we approach Mt. Zion, and “the spirits of those made perfect”, I found it odd that Christ was always portrayed in the throne-room surrounded by everyone thanking him, praising him, worshipping him, but *not* praying to him. I kept thinking that Catholics had it right when they asked the saints in heaven to pray for them. Not that “The Master” let me down. He certainly did answer my prayers. For a “mate”, he gave me my wife Shelley of thirty-four years, and the “mission”; well, that is still being revealed!

The Ultimate Mom: Perhaps it was the story-teller/writer in me that started to think that something/someone else was missing in my spiritual life, in my understanding of heaven. But it wasn't until I started to go to a Catholic Church that the missing persons in that “Throne Room” were identified. Of course! **A great King would not be sitting on the throne by himself, rather, He would be surrounded by His Bride: The Church, the mighty men and women comprising it, and most prominently, there by His side, would also be...**

His Mother. In Mass, I have found various feast days to be inspiring, and revelatory, for now I pray that these saints in glory would pray to the Lord our God for me; that the virtues they enjoyed would be created by the hand of almighty God in me as well. I love the fact that in any given Mass, a saint who has been dead for 1500 years can be recognized and their prayers requested. That is heavenly stuff! I also ask that the first, the ultimate disciple of all would pray for me as well, since she is the finest reflection of God's glory ever found in a created being. That, of course, is Jesus' mother, now our mother, Mary.

The Eucharist: Symbol or Heaven Itself? The same Protestants who dismiss baptism as the real impartation of grace usually also dismiss the possibility of the real presence of Christ being imparted in the Eucharist. It follows that if you deny the power of the sacrament of baptism, you would likewise deny the power of the Eucharist. I therefore raise a flag of truce and ask for a parlay of both camps! Come hither, let us talk peacefully! Here, as both camps, Protestant and Catholic, gather under the white flag, we agree on many points.

We all agree that the God-who-created-everything-by-the-words-of-His-mouth so *humbled* himself, that He was born of a Virgin. And when this child became a man, He *humbled himself even more*, to be tempted by every temptation common to man. We also all agree that this Man-born-of-the-Virgin *humbled himself yet again*, to the point of dying on a cross. But then, after His resurrection, *God would never continue to humble Himself to the point of becoming bread and wine!* The Protestant nods in affirmation, and the Catholic says, **“Why would He stop humbling Himself at this point?!”** The storyteller in me shouts, **“The Catholics have it right!”**

Jesus said, “Lo, I am with you always”. The Protestant says, “Today, that means that Jesus is with us by His Holy Spirit”. The Catholic says, “Today, at Mass, Jesus was physically present to me in the Eucharist, *and* spiritually present by His Holy Spirit, and in the community of saints”. Why would the sending of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost countermand Jesus' declaration found in John 6? God, the ultimate iconoclast, smashes the barrier of heaven and earth, time and space, when He says that when we eat the bread of His flesh, and drink His blood that it *is* real food and drink indeed. The limits of heaven and earth, of time and space are like putty in the hands of Jesus, the Creator-made-flesh.

Now From the Heart. So far, I've given you some practical plumbing tips, songs about 'repairing' donuts, reflections on the Sacraments, apostolic succession, the keys of Peter, the Communion of the Saints, and the Eucharist. I have two more things, but these are

from my heart. You see, I am a child of divorce. My heart was broken when my mother divorced several times, and both of my parents re-married, providing me with two half-brothers, a half-sister, and a myriad of step-siblings. Of course, I am happy that I got siblings out of the deal, but our family unity was scattered to the wind, and I had to adjust to a whole new framework for my identity. My agonies really prepared me to receive the Gospel.

When I became a Christian, there at Gospel Temple of Philadelphia, I was told that this would be my 'forever family'. That was true for about three years, until the senior pastor committed adultery, and our church went on to split several times in several ways. That was when Shelley and I moved on; out to LA, then to Nashville, and then back to Philadelphia. Over the next thirty years, we belonged to a variety of Protestant churches. Of the eight churches that we were members during that time, four of them split and divided for a variety of reasons. The closest emotion that I can equate with a church split, especially in our younger years, is the pain in my heart when my own parents divorced. It was an agony to see friends shattered and scattered. (I pulled the car over several times during that period to weep.) I have to admit, by the time the last church split, we saw it coming and 'ducked'. Now that I am a Catholic, I have learned that the 'denominations' that I had taken for granted in my Protestant experience had not always been there. To study church history is to discover that about five hundred years ago, people known as "The Reformers" split away from the Catholic Church to form a 'new brand' of Christianity that did not include the "See of Rome" in the equation. It was, essentially, a *divorce*; a split driven by sincerity and the need for reform, but resulting in the great divide that we see today. I find that it forces me into choices that are very difficult. As a child of divorce, I found that I had to choose between my father's lifestyle and my mother's lifestyle. I found that choice to be impossible, untenable, and emotionally debilitating. Now I have to make a choice between two spiritual families:

I love contemporary music, clapping and singing. For that I would have to go to a Protestant church. But I have a deeper need for solemnity and the awe that accompanies worship in the Communion of the Saints. That is why I now go to the Catholic Church. Furthermore, I appreciate the myriad of Biblical applications that the brilliant teachers of the Protestant church have to offer about every aspect of life; marriage, finance, faith, child-rearing **and so on**. But I would rather have a five minute homily followed by the real presence of Christ found in the Eucharist any day of the week; (or should I say, *every* day of the week.) If you are struggling with the style differences between modern Protestant seeker-friendliness and solemn Catholic liturgy, I can empathize!

Marriage: A Shadow Cast From Heaven: As I reflect on my two trades, music and plumbing, I forgot to mention the obvious: I learned these trades *in order to provide for my family*. My driving force has always been that my loved ones would be provided for. But now I have been pointed toward a mystery that makes me now peer over every cloud and look eagerly beyond the horizon to heaven itself. Here's why:

In my twenty months now as a Catholic, the most profound teaching I have found is called, “The Theology of the Body”, and was, in my humble estimation, one of the high-points from the teaching of the great Pope John Paul II. He observed essentially that, “All analogies of heaven are imperfect, but the *spousal analogy* for the Kingdom of God is the *least imperfect*”.

In short, I am living in a Sacrament called “Marriage”. My marriage is actually a veil for heaven itself. The light source is the Trinity, shining through the Throne-room of heaven, and earthly marriage is the shadow this light casts. The “Theology of the Body” observes that all created things point toward their creator, but Christian marriage, Catholic marriage, is the ‘Crown of God’s Creation’.

For a child of divorce, with such dysfunctional experiences and shattered memories, for me to ‘get back on the saddle’ and ride off into the sunset with my wife Shelley at my side is a miracle of sorts, don’t you think? Shelley is also a child of divorce. We met in church and then thirty four years later we came into the Catholic Church together. We both absolutely agree that the Sacraments are now an indispensable agent of grace within this grace we know as our marriage. We both agree that the two key Sacraments that keep us going are Confession and the Eucharist. Modern man’s pessimism claims that you can never give what you never got. As Catholics, we disagree. **The God-head, The Trinity, is the eternal source of all Unity, and The Marriage of Jesus, the Son of God, the Second Person of the Trinity, to His Bride, The Church, with His Mother, Mary, by His scarred side, with St. Joseph standing nobly in attendance, is the heavenly model that we can call upon for prayer, and earnestly emulate.**

I leave you with this “spousal analogy”. On my wedding night, I did not *take* the keys from my bride, rather, I *gave* them to her. Shelley got the keys to the house, keys to the car, and keys to our bank account brimming with \$640. She did not need to ask me every time she used the keys. I “endowed her” with full authority to use them, anytime, as my bride, as she saw fit. So it is with Jesus giving the keys to Peter. When He gave the keys to Peter, He was endowed his “bride”, the Church with all authority necessary to conduct earthly affairs in His Name, until His return. I thank God that my home is now under Peter who is under Christ. This “Singing Plumber” has a lot of work to do, and a lot of songs yet to sing, Yes, I rejoice to call myself a Roman Catholic.

Rob Evans