

In early July 2001, I was getting ready to attend Mass at my home parish in Boise, Idaho. I realized it was exactly 20 years to the day of my conversion to Christianity from Mormonism.

And as a Catholic of less than two years, I was still finding that there was always some part of the Mass that causes me to for a lump in my throat or my eyes to well with tears. I wondered which part of the Mass would strike me most on this special day: receiving the Eucharist? Singing a particular song? The homily?

It turned out to be none of those. Instead, I choked up a little when we started the Creed: "We believe in ONE God, the Father, the Almighty, maker of Heaven and Earth, of all that is seen and unseen. We believe in ONE Lord Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten from the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God..."

Reciting that ancient creed, written to protect the church from the very heresies that I had formerly believed, brought tears to my eyes. By God's grace, I had indeed come a long way from polytheism to monotheism and from the doctrines of men into the bosom of the church "of the living God, the pillar and foundation of truth." (I Tim. 3:15)

My journey to Rome, my final destination after 26 years of traveling, starts in Salt Lake City, headquarters of a worldwide religion whose creed acknowledges the existence of many gods and declares that Jesus, though divine, is not God.

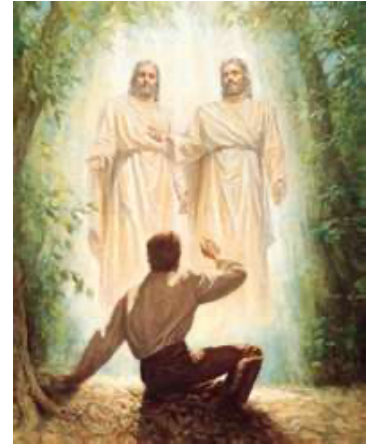
After eight years in Mormonism, my journey then takes a "circuitous route" through the evangelical and Lutheran branches of Protestantism. Looking back on my story, I can see now how God was drawing me into Catholicism almost immediately from the moment I became a Christian, even though that leg of my journey took another 18 years after leaving Mormonism.

I grew up in a small ranching community in Montana. My mom, a lapsed Catholic, and my father, a Lutheran, had me baptized in the Lutheran Church. I thank God every day for the grace of that baptism. From that moment on, I was His and no matter how far I would stray, Jesus kept me.

My parents divorced when I was 5, and I was raised by my mom and stepdad. We were not church-goers except for a few summer mornings at Vacation Bible School at the local Methodist church. However, I recall first becoming intrigued by matters of faith listening to Billy Graham preaching during his three-night crusades on network television. Little did I know, his influence on my life was just beginning.

In our very small town, most teen-aged boys filled their spare time with sports or at keggers. Not athletic and never a drinker, I had a hard time fitting in. Until I met the Mormons.

My first date at age 15 with a Mormon girl was listening to her tell me the incredible story of Mormonism founder Joseph Smith's visions. She said God the Father and Jesus appeared to a 14-year-old Joseph when he inquired about which church to join. Jesus told him none of the religions were true and their creeds – like the one I quoted above – were "an abomination." He was told the true church would be restored to the Earth through him.



My date told me of more visions Joseph Smith received from an angel named Moroni, who led the boy prophet to golden plates from which he miraculously translated into the Book of Mormon. Incredible as it all sounded, I thought she could be telling me the truth, mostly because she was so sincere. I also knew other Mormon teens in our school just as devout. They were, without exception, among the brightest and most clean-cut kids in our high school.

After the Mormon told their story, I asked classmates of other faiths what they believed. The Methodists said they didn't know and the Catholics told me to talk to a priest. The Mormons, on the other hand, knew their religion thoroughly and weren't at all ashamed to share it. I admired that. There was something different about this religion.

I agreed to take a series of six "discussions" taught by Mormon missionaries. I also started going to Mormon social events like volleyball games and dances at the church gym. That led to attending church services. Instead of listening to a sermon from the same preacher every week, the lay Mormon "priesthood," and the women, and even children, gave talks and "testimonies". I especially enjoyed the testimonies. Members often got emotional sharing their firm belief that Joseph Smith was a true prophet, that the Book of Mormon was the inerrant word of God and that the church, led by a modern-day prophet and living apostles, was "the only true and living church on the face of the whole earth." How could people with such conviction be wrong?

The discussions with the missionaries turned into many late-night sessions. I couldn't get enough. (More telling, I was to find out later, is what the missionaries DIDN'T tell me.) Perhaps even more persuasive than the teaching, was the attention and affirmation I was getting from the good Mormon people; something I was not getting from my biological family. The tight-knit Mormon community was becoming my community, my family. On the last day of my junior year in high school at age 16, I was baptized a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

From that moment on, my life was consumed by Mormonism: early-morning seminary with other Mormon teens, getting ordained a "deacon" and then, three months later, a "teacher" in the Aaronic Priesthood, traveling to Missoula for "stake dances" and preparing to attend Ricks College, at the time the largest privately owned junior college in the United States. (Located in Rexburg, Idaho, it is now BYU-Idaho.)

In Montana, we Mormons were a tiny minority. At Ricks College, there were 5,500 other students, all who believed the same as me. I immersed myself in campus life. I was editor of the campus newspaper by my sophomore year and named one of 25 "Outstanding Young Men of Ricks College."

It was during my sophomore year at Ricks College that I began to hear about Mormon beliefs I hadn't heard while taking the missionary discussions.

While studying one night in my dorm room, I came across this quote by Joseph Smith:

"God himself was once as we are now, and is an exalted man, and sits enthroned in yonder heavens! ... I am going to tell you how God came to be God. We have imagined and supposed that God was God from all eternity. I will refute that idea and take away the veil, so that you may see ... He was once a man like us; yea, that God himself, the Father of us all, dwelt on an Earth, the same as Jesus Christ did... Here, then is eternal life -- to know the only wise and true God; and you have got to learn to be gods yourselves, and to be kings and priests to God, the same as all gods have done before you."



I wasn't surprised by Smith's teaching that God was a man with flesh and bone. I had heard that before. However, the part about God progressing through a human stage upward to Deity and that I was on that same path with millions of other Mormon men -- that was new.

My roommate, a lifelong Mormon preparing to serve a mission, said this was the doctrine of "eternal progression." He said it was basic to Mormon belief, yet apparently not basic enough to be taught in the missionary lessons. The doctrine was not talked about. I had been a Latter-day Saint for nearly three years when I first heard it explained to me in this way. Many LDS categorize this doctrine as among those "deep" teachings that may be difficult now but will be fully appreciated in the hereafter. The teaching struck me as odd, but no more so than the Christian concept of the Trinity. Regarding the Trinity, I agreed with Smith who also said:

"Many men say there is one God, that the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost are only one God! I say that is a strange God anyhow ... He would a wonderfully big God -- he would be a giant or a monster."

Not long after graduating from Ricks, I received my call to a two-year mission to Sydney, Australia.

At that time, missionaries called to English-speaking countries went to a missionary training center in Salt Lake City where we immediately began memorizing our six

discussions. The discussions were packed with questions so loaded that the only rational answers "investigators" could give were the ones we wanted to hear. Just as important as knowing what to say was knowing what NOT to say. That disturbing doctrine of eternal progression was one of those doctrines to be avoided. "Don't give them the meat before they've had the milk," our mission president advised us. Other taboo topics included the temple ceremony, the temple garments and the ban on African-Americans from entering the priesthood. (It was midway through my mission – in 1978 – that LDS President Spencer W. Kimball received the "revelation" that allowed blacks into our temples and our priesthood.)

When presented with questions that delved too deeply into Mormon theology or history, missionaries were to steer the conversation away from the controversial topics and politely, but firmly, bear our testimony to the truthfulness of the gospel and leave. The pat response to every objection for which there was not a ready answer was our hope that the investigator would seek the same testimony we had by praying about the Book of Mormon or about Joseph Smith's calling as a true prophet. After praying, he or she would get a "burning in the bosom," from God that it was true. If the burning didn't come, keep praying until it did.

The first year of my mission was successful. I quickly moved up in the mission ranks from junior companion to senior companion. After only three months out, I was a "trainer" for new missionaries. After four months, I was a "district leader," presiding over six missionaries. Eight months out, I was called to serve as a zone leader.

As a zone leader, the bicycle was traded for a small Toyota Corolla – steering wheel on the right-hand side – so my companion and I could travel to other missionary districts and train the 16 or so missionaries over which we presided. Shortly after my first year, I was asked by the mission president to be a "public relations missionary." We went into downtown Sydney, presenting seminars on communication skills to business and government officials. I was also sent to Canberra, the national capital, where we taught discussions and gave presentations to political figures. I remember sitting in the ornate Parliament House office of the Minister for Education, telling him about the Mormon Family Home Evening program.

During the second year of my mission, things started to change. I look back on it now as a time that God really started working in me. I had received a triune, Christian baptism. Even though I had strayed from orthodox Christianity, I was still in God's family and I believe the grace that flowed from that baptism opened my heart and my mind to see things that my companions, just as smart or smarter than me, could not see.

Working in an upper-class neighborhood of Sydney, my companion and I were knocking on the doors of a more than usual number of evangelical Christians. I'd like to say it was Catholics who had the most profound impact on me while on my mission, but that wouldn't be true. It was the "born-again," as we missionaries called them, who invited us in and found a way to politely interrupt our memorized lesson plans to share their definition of gospel or "good news" that was quite different than ours. While our

emphasis was on the organization of the church and the prophet, their clear emphasis was on relationship, not so much on religion. Their love for Jesus Christ was evident and seemed to me to be more animated by the Holy Spirit when compared to my relationship to my church.

The evangelicals asked penetrating questions, always wanted to get back to that thorny issue of who Jesus is. *"Who do men say that I am?" (Matt 16.:13)* Was Jesus a prophet or one of the great prophets come back to life? Is He, as Mormons claim, a secondary god, not to be prayed to like Heavenly Father? Was He born of a Virgin conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit, as Christians claim, or was he born in the same way that all men are, the product of a sexual union, as early Mormon leaders claimed?¹

When these challenges came up, I vigorously defended Mormonism. My companions often expressed amazement at my debating ability. What neither the investigators nor my companions knew was that in the quiet of my room at night I was confused. The scriptures Christians were sharing with me were starting to take root in my heart. *"I (Paul) planted, Apollos watered, but God caused the growth." I Cor. 3:6.*

At the same time, I was getting regular letters and Christian books from an aunt who had recently converted to Christianity. She didn't try to convert me from Mormonism, but shared her deep love for Jesus and what He was doing in her life. Later, Aunt Bev told me that she prayed for my conversion every day while I was in Australia.

One by one, these Christians, like Paul and Apollos, were planting and watering seeds. (I Cor. 3:6)

I was also becoming increasingly troubled by the tactics we used to gain converts. Our mission president was one of the church's full-time leaders out of Salt Lake City called "general authorities." He introduced a discussion he called the "Day of Pentecost" discussion. It explained some of the fundamentals of Mormonism in one sitting.

¹ Particularly troubling to me were scriptures they'd share from the Old Testament Book of Isaiah that seemed to clearly refute the idea of there being more than one god.

Isa. 42:8 – *"I am the Lord, that is my name; my glory I give to no other ..."*

Isa. 43: 10,11 – *"... Before me no god was formed, nor shall there be any after me. I, I am the Lord; and besides me there is no savior."*

Our typical response to these verses was that they referred only to the God of **this** world, the only God with whom we had anything to do with. For us, we'd say, there is only one God.

"Do you know more than God Himself?" one elderly Catholic man asked me once. "Of course not!" I said. He pointed me to **Isaiah 44:8** – *"Fear not, nor be afraid; have I not told you from of old and declared it? And you are my witnesses! Is there a God besides me? There is no Rock; I **know not any.**"* (Emphasis mine.)

Even the omniscient God was not aware of the existence of other gods, though we Mormons were sure of multiple deities.

Prospective converts would be invited by missionaries or church members in Australia to come to the church. We'd show a film about Joseph Smith's first vision. Then we'd take them through a 90-minute discussion, bear a strong testimony and then we'd take them into private rooms, get them on their knees, pray with them, and challenge them to be baptized. The pressure to be baptized was intense. "Do you feel that warm feeling in your heart?" we'd ask the investigator after an emotional presentation. "That's God telling you these things are true. Are you willing to do what God is telling you?" Those who agreed were dressed in all white baptismal clothes and taken back to an already-filled baptismal font to be immersed.

They had walked into the church as curious inquirers and now, just three hours later, they were baptized members of the Mormon Church, many of them giving up lifelong religious affiliations. Many of them didn't have a clue of the consequences of their decision. In one night, they'd throw out all their past teachings and accepted Mormonism and its temple rituals, not having an understanding of what they were embracing. It didn't matter that they didn't understand it all, our mission president taught us. They had received a witness of the Holy Spirit, similar to what the apostles got at the Day of Pentecost; thus they knew the church was true. All the details could come later. Further, our mission president told us it had been revealed to him by that same Holy Spirit that this Day of Pentecost discussion was the method that would be used to teach inquirers from now on.

A few weeks later, that mission president left and another arrived. Gradually the new mission president re-introduced the standard six discussions. (So much for our previous leader's revelation!) The change back to six lessons was primarily because local church leaders were complaining about new converts who knew nothing of Mormonism and would eventually become inactive or quit attending church altogether. (After I had returned from my mission, I learned that this new mission president had been sent home suddenly after promising sister missionaries that if they didn't marry in this life, they'd be married to him in heaven.)

All of these events were converging to make the latter part of my mission starkly different than the first year. Unlike the early months of my mission, the latter months dragged on. I was confused, praying constantly that I wasn't leading people astray. After I questioned some of our teaching tactics, I was demoted from zone leader to district leader.

During our rare hours off (Mondays to 5 p.m.), we'd visit sites within our assigned area and I found myself attracted to Catholic churches and the cathedral in downtown Sydney. (I told my companions I was interested in architecture.) In these churches, which we missionaries snidely dubbed "monuments to the apostasy," I felt a peace I had never before experienced. Instead of being repulsed by the statues and stained-glass windows, I was impressed by their beauty and inspired by their messages. I loved the quiet, the sense of the sacred.

During the very last weeks of my mission, Christians were busily preparing for a different sort of missionary. The Christian evangelist Billy Graham was coming to Sydney. Though I wasn't supposed to, I read the newspaper accounts of his pending visit and got further introduction into Christian theology as a result. It was the second time Graham would influence my life and it wouldn't be the last.

Returning from my mission, I immediately enrolled at Brigham Young University's Provo, Utah, campus. Here, at the academic mecca of Mormonism, I would get all the answers to the questions that surfaced during my mission.

Back in the security of Zion's Wasatch Mountains, I buried all those troubling questions by immersing myself even more in church activity. I did more sessions in the Provo Temple, even though I was inwardly troubled by all the secret oaths, handgrips and gestures needed to get past the veil and into the highest heaven. I was also involved in our student ward (congregation) of about 200, teaching priesthood classes and eventually being named elders' quorum president, the leader of the men in the ward.

My curiosity about other faiths did not ebb, however. I enrolled in a comparative religion class. One of our assignments was to attend another church and write a paper. It was a perfect cover for me to attend lots of churches.

I started comparing earlier versions of the Book of Mormon with the current version and earlier editions of Joseph Smith's *Book of Commandments* with the current *Doctrine and Covenants*. In its earliest days, Mormonism taught that Jesus was God. The church had no Melchizedek or Aaronic priesthood and no temple ceremonies. All those were added in later years as Joseph Smith's visions and his written revelations were adapted to meet the church's ever-changing theology.² Joseph Smith's many versions of his famous "First Vision," even had to be adapted to meet the church's changing theology on the nature of God.³

² For example, the first edition of the Book of Mormon, published in 1830, clearly taught there was one God, and that Jesus was God.

1 Nephi 11:18 – *"Behold, the virgin which thou seest, is the mother of God, after the manner of the flesh."* (Sounds rather Catholic to me!)

However, in 1838, the Book of Mormon was "updated," partly to account for Joseph Smith's evolving theology regarding the nature of God. The 1838 version reads, *"Behold, the virgin which thou seest, is the mother of **the son of** God, after the manner of the flesh."* (Emphasis mine.)

This is done in several places. Three verses later, the original Book of Mormon reads: *"And the angel said unto me, 'Behold, the Lamb of God, yea, even the Eternal Father!'"* The 1838 version reads, *"... even the **son of the Eternal Father!**"*

I Nephi 13:40 in the original version reads, *"These last records ... shall make known to all kindreds, tongues and people, that the Lamb of God is the Eternal Father and Savior."* The 1838 version: *"... that the Lamb of God is the **son of the Eternal Father and THE Savior.**"*

³ Other disturbing facts I learned during my research:

During the period I was doing all this researching, I had become engaged to a BYU coed, the daughter of a Mormon bishop in New Jersey. We were to be married in the Washington, D.C. LDS Temple, a week after graduation.

- The *Book of Mormon*, which is supposed to contain the “fullness of the gospel,” and be the most correct book on Earth, even more correct than the Bible, makes no mention of key teachings of Mormonism including priesthood, temples, work for the dead, eternal progression to Godhead, and different levels of heaven. That’s because the *Book of Mormon* was written before other books of scripture: the *Doctrine and Covenants* and the *Pearl of Great Price*. Both these latter works were published to accommodate the church’s evolving teachings.
- Mormons emphasize that the “restoration” of the true church was necessary because the “priesthood authority,” to baptize and administer sacraments had been removed from the Earth because of apostasy. In other words, the church Jesus had established 17 centuries earlier had failed. The priesthood authority was lost after the death of the original apostles. Yet, the whole notion of a Mormon priesthood was non-existent in the early months of the church’s existence! Sidney Rigdon, a former preacher in the Campbellite restorationist movement – the forerunner of today’s Disciples of Christ and Church of Christ – left the Campbellites because they would not adopt his idea of the need for priesthood. In 1831, a year after the official organization of the Mormon Church, Rigdon talked Smith into organizing a priesthood. Whole chapters and verses of the *Doctrine and Covenants* (sections 2, 13 and 27) had to be inserted to accommodate the new priesthood. The chapters and verses were stuck in between existing chapters and verses to make it appear as if key revelations, including visits from John the Baptist bestowing the Aaronic Priesthood and, later, Peter, James and John, bringing the Melchizedek priesthood, were in place at the time the church was organized when, in fact, no such priesthood was established.
- Another book of scripture, the *Pearl of Great Price*, from whence the doctrine of eternal progression originates, was supposed to have included the writings of the Old Testament prophet Abraham translated by Joseph Smith from some papyrus that had been given him. When the papyrus that Joseph Smith translated was discovered after a fire at the New York Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1966, the church hired experts to translate it. The professional translators found the writings to be fairly common Egyptian funeral texts that had nothing to do with Abraham. One of the Mormon translators left the church after being told he could not reveal his findings.
- Finally, and perhaps most troubling, was what I learned about the character of the “prophet” himself. When the Mormons were headquartered in Nauvoo, Ill., Joseph Smith secretly engaged in polygamy. He also ordered a few other church leaders to begin the practice, even though he denied it publicly. Some disenchanted church members printed a newspaper exposing Smith’s double life. Furious, Smith, ordered the printing press destroyed. Smith and his brother, Hyrum, were jailed for the criminal act. It was while the Smiths were incarcerated that an angry mob burst into the Carthage, Ill., jail on June 27, 1844, and brutally murdered Smith and his brother. Mormons consider both Smiths martyrs. But martyrs, like St. Stephen, first martyr of the church, go willingly to their deaths. The Smiths went down in a blazing gunfight. Joseph even shouted the Masonic distress cry, “*Is there no help for the widow’s son!*” hoping Masons in the angry mob would come to his rescue. Ironically, many of Smith’s antagonists were Masons who were angry because Smith, a former mason, had stolen many of Masonry’s secret rituals and included them in the Mormon temple ceremony. The murder was unfortunate not only because of its brutality, but because it resulted in a change of leadership to the charismatic Brigham Young, who led the church westward and shaped it into the worldwide religion it is today. Smith’s own wife and son, refusing to accept polygamy, stayed back in the Midwest to form the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, which has since become the Community of Christ, disavowing nearly all the distinctive teachings of Mormonism. Many theologians believe that Smith’s credibility was declining at the time of his death and that had his murder not occurred, Mormonism would have either died out or remained an inconsequential Midwestern sect.

Two months before the wedding, I went home to Montana to my uncle's wedding. It was a rough time for me. I wanted so much to stay in the church, especially now that I was engaged. But, deep down, I was fearful that Mormonism wasn't what it claimed to be. Most troubling was that Doctrine of Eternal Progression, gnawing at me since Ricks College days. The idea that Jesus progressed to his deity and that I could progress to godhood just didn't ring true, much as I wanted to believe it.

Those thoughts foremost in my mind, I walked into the small Foursquare Gospel church in which my uncle and his bride were about to recite their vows. There, arched across the front of the church was this passage from Hebrews 13:8: "**Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, and today, and forever.**" I quickly sat down, literally trembling. How could Jesus progress if he was the same yesterday, today and forever?

That night I realized I had a choice to make. The Christian Jesus and the Mormon Jesus were clearly not the same. I had to decide which one I was going to follow.

I returned to BYU and began reading the Bible, absent any Mormon commentary. I prayed to God for answers. Eventually, I called the engagement off with little explanation to my bewildered fiancée. I didn't dare tell her or my roommates, one of whom was my closest friend, that I, the elders' quorum president, was having real doubts about my faith. What if I was wrong and my doubts would lead them to also doubt?

My journalism professor informed me of an available internship with a bi-weekly newspaper in Evanston, Wyoming. I immediately accepted. Less than a two-hour drive from Provo, it was far enough away to allow me opportunity for more study and prayer and yet close enough to come back to my friends and ex-fiancée if I was wrong.



Unpacking my books, I came across a paperback edition of *"How to Be Born Again,"* by Billy Graham. I had bought that book years ago at a gas station in Dillon, Montana, but had never read it. This book was as good a place to start as any, I figured.

I read Graham's book in one sitting. At the end, he encourages his readers to read the Gospel of John. I had done that as a Mormon many times. This night I would see it through new eyes.

John 1:1,2 – *"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God."*

I kept reading through verse 14, after which I abruptly stopped. *"And the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us, as we saw his glory, the glory as of the Father's only Son, full of grace and truth."*

For reasons I will never fully understand, I stopped after reading verse 14 and went back up to verses 1 and 2. My thought process, which I recall as clearly as if it were last night: "It's clear that this Word who becomes flesh and dwells among us is Jesus. So, if Jesus is the Word and the Word, as verse 2 says, is God, then Jesus must be God!"

That's the most basic theology for Protestant, Orthodox and Catholic Christians. But it was new and even revolutionary to me.

That night I was convinced Jesus is God. Every other question was secondary to this ultimate question, "*Who do men say that I am?*" He is God -- the same yesterday, today and forever! He is God, and I never will be. That night, I left Mormonism forever.

But, leaving the church meant leaving everything else behind: home, friends, job. Some Lutherans in Evanston put me in touch with a Lutheran couple in Seward, Nebraska, who agreed to let me stay with them while I worked for the newspaper. I headed east to Nebraska to start life over.

Journey Home – Part II

Because of the strong witness of evangelicals, my inclination, during my early days of being a Christian, was to attend evangelical churches. Really, it didn't matter to me which church I attended. I loved fellowshiping with orthodox Christians, who believed in one God; that Jesus was God and that the Bible was God's word without any need for additional scripture to justify new revelation. I will always be grateful to the evangelical Christians who had zeal enough for their faith to share it with me and who educated me in the basics of Christianity.

My attitude toward Catholics, at the time, was indifferent. Unlike some of my evangelical friends, I did not believe Catholics were lost. I knew Catholics who loved Jesus and the Catholic Church had a relatively new pope in John Paul II who seemed to me a powerful witness for Christ, particularly in the Communist world.

I wasn't in Nebraska long when the home teachers from the local LDS branch came calling. I was amazed at how well the church kept tabs on its members. I found out that if I wanted my name off the membership rolls of the church, I would have to be excommunicated. I wrote a letter to a bishop in Lincoln requesting excommunication.

The excommunication took 14 months. At my excommunication "trial," I faced the three-member stake presidency and the 12-member stake high council, the highest church officials in the area. I was told I could call witnesses on my behalf, but they had to be church members in good standing. Needless to say, I couldn't find any sympathetic to my view.

It was a great experience. To coin a favorite Mormon phrase, I "bore my new testimony" of Jesus Christ as God come in the flesh. They listened respectfully, asked me a few questions and then excused me while they voted in secret.

After about a half hour, I was called back into the room and told I had been formally excommunicated, that my temple recommend was revoked and that I was no longer to wear the sacred undergarments. After it was over, each man shook my hand and expressed a sincere desire that I would one day return to the church.⁴

After a short year in Seward, I was drawn to a bigger college town just 24 miles away, Lincoln, home of the University of Nebraska. I moved into the Agape House, a Christian-based campus house for college and career adults. It was there I met my first wife. She was a member of the independent Christian Church, the centrist branch of the Campbellite movement, in between the conservative Church of Christ and the liberal Disciples of Christ.

After we married, I took a job as editor of a bi-weekly newspaper in Fairbury, southwest of Lincoln. There the congregation of First Baptist Church, an American Baptist congregation, immediately welcomed us.

Knowing I was considering ministry, my pastor at First Baptist gave my name to a nearby Presbyterian pastor who needed an associate to help with four rural congregations in southeast Nebraska and north-central Kansas. I readily accepted the invitation to preach and teach. Each Sunday he would take two churches and I would take the other two. The next Sunday we'd switch.

After nearly four years in Fairbury, other newspaper jobs took us to Omaha and Columbus. Living in different towns and attending different congregations, I became more familiar with the nuances that separate the many branches of Protestantism. While serving on church boards, I witnessed many congregational squabbles. More troubling were the splits that would occur over issues like speaking in tongues.

It also troubled me that if a church lost a pastor who was particularly well-liked, it was not at all unusual for that pastor's followers to switch to his new church. If the pastor relocated to a different city, some of his followers would start attending another church. The strife and pain it caused in congregations was evident.

I began to wonder if all these splits were healthy for a church that was supposed to be united. What kind of witness were we for the world with all our squabbling and division? "*Is Christ divided?*" St. Paul asked in I Corinthians 1:13. Weren't we all baptized in the same name of Christ?

⁴The process for those choosing to leave the LDS church has become much simpler. Now, members can simply request by letter to resign from the church. Excommunication is typically reserved for those who want to fight to retain membership but have publicly questioned church doctrine or practice. The expedited resignation process is due largely to the fact that so many are leaving. Church leaders are always proud to announce the number of converts at every April world conference, but they never release the number of those leaving, which, with the advent of the Internet, is significant.

Our Mormon friends have a valid point about the value of a central authority of some type that could put a rest to all this disorder in the church. The Protestant view that the Bible is open to private interpretation plays a role in division after division with, now thousands of Protestant groups. Protestants claimed the Bible as the ultimate authority in all things. However, the result of such a view seemed anything but authoritative.

I also found myself beginning to enjoy liturgy, even in the small doses we received in the Presbyterian churches where I preached. Evangelicals typically shun that kind of worship as rote and ritualistic. In my view, liturgy brought a sense of order and reverence to worship that often focused too much around the personality of the pastor or on the upbeat music. I didn't seek to be entertained; I wanted to worship. I liked the idea of reciting ancient creeds written to protect the church from the very kind of heresies to which I had been attracted. It was comforting for me to know that Christians all over the world were saying the same prayers and reciting the same creeds.

In 1991, an opportunity came to move back to our native Northwest. Both my wife and I were originally from Montana and still had the majority of our families there. I took a job in Idaho Falls, Idaho, just four hours from my Montana home.

After settling in Idaho Falls, I realized this was an opportunity to seek out more liturgical worship. We started attending the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod because it was conservative theologically and I loved the liturgy. Surprisingly, so did my wife.

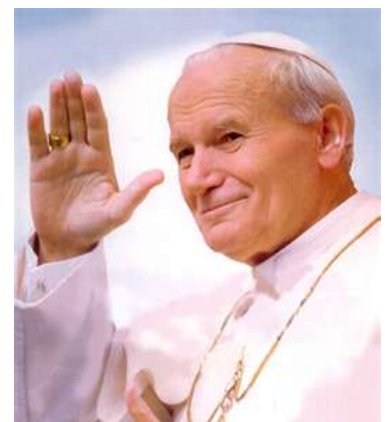
In the Lutheran church, I felt closer to the roots of historic Christianity. Worshipping there was beginning to satisfy an inner need for sacrament and liturgy.

Journey Home – Part III

For six years, my wife, my daughter and I were involved in our Lutheran congregation. During that period, I continued my study of theology and church history.

There were several encounters with the Catholic Church.

The first came in 1993 when Pope John Paul II was in the United States to attend World Youth Day in Denver. During the late night hours, C-SPAN aired hours of World Youth Day events. I was sensing a deep spirituality among Catholic young people I had not noticed before.



My interest in comparative theology prompted our Lutheran congregation's Christian education director to ask me to teach an adult class. We started with pseudo-Christian religions including Mormonism, Jehovah's Witnesses and Christian Science. We then decided to study Catholicism. I stocked my personal library with books on Catholicism.

The books helped me correct a lot of misconceptions I had about Catholic devotion to Mary and the church's teaching that we are saved by grace alone, but not by faith alone.

For many years, dating back to Mormon missionary days, whenever I was in a city with a Catholic cathedral, I made a point to visit. I loved the architecture, the stained-glass windows, the Stations of the Cross and the statues of the great Saints and the Blessed Virgin. Even more profound was this sense of peace I felt inside each church.

I recalled as a Mormon missionary telling people they would feel warmth in their heart when they prayed about the Book of Mormon or Joseph Smith. Ironically, the closest I ever came to feeling that warmth was sitting in a Catholic church. One shouldn't ascertain truth simply by feelings alone. In fact, scripture warns us that the heart can deceive us. Still, I believe that God, through His Spirit, draws us into truth using both mind and heart. I did not understand at the time the Catholic teaching about the presence of Jesus in the Tabernacle.

Despite all those inspired "calling cards," to the Catholic Church -- my visiting cathedrals, World Youth Day in Denver, teaching classes about Catholicism -- it was something totally out of my control that caused me to attend a Catholic Mass.

One Sunday after church, almost entirely out of the blue, my wife informed me that neither she nor my daughter would be attending our Lutheran church anymore. Both said they attended only because I liked it but they had been unhappy there for some time. So, after six years of attending the same church (unusual for me), we were church shopping again.

My daughter, then about 13, said she had friends who attended a Catholic parish in town and she wanted to try it. We did, and the Mass was an instant hit with both my wife and daughter. I enjoyed it, but was uncomfortable with the idea of becoming Catholic. I eventually agreed to participate in RCIA (Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults) classes. I missed a number of the classes because my job took me out of town. My wife, however, attended regularly.

At one of my first classes back, after missing several weeks, I was quite surprised to hear my wife, raised in a fundamentalist Nebraska church, stand up and resolutely quote John Henry Newman: "To be deep into history is to cease to be a Protestant." She had always been a great lover of history and been reading the writings of the early church Fathers. I started doing the same.

I read about early liturgical manuals, believed to have been written between 60 and 90 A.D., even before some of the New Testament was written, that speak of the Mass as a sacrificial re-enactment of the crucifixion and of the believer's participation in the one sacrifice of Christ.

St. Ignatius of Antioch, who lived in the first century, wrote about heretics "who do not

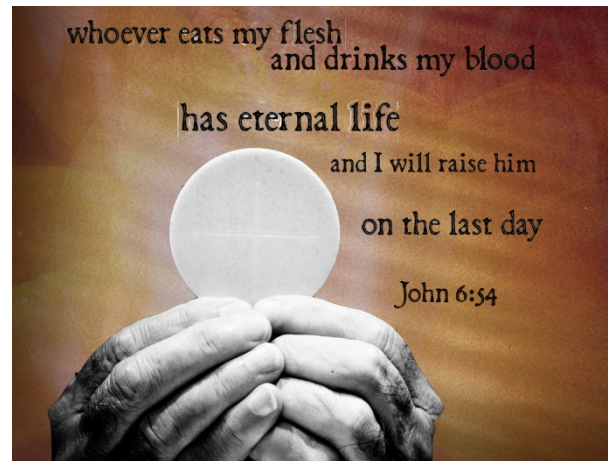
confess that the Eucharist is the flesh of our savior, Jesus Christ." Other early references point to the organization of the church, led by the bishops as successors to the apostles. St. Irenaeus, bishop of Lyons at the end of the second century, even provides a history of the papacy from St. Peter to his time.

But it is the gospel writer, St. John, who, for the second time in my life, leads me into truth. In my Mormon days, it was the first chapter of John that convinced me that Jesus is the Word, who is God in the flesh. Now, it was the sixth chapter that proved to be life changing.

In this chapter, St. John clearly establishes the consecrated bread and wine in the Eucharist as literally the body and blood of Christ.

In verse 28, the disciples ask Jesus, *"What must we do, to be doing the works of God?"*

Jesus said to them, *"This is the work of God, that you believe in the one he sent." So they said to him, "Then what sign do you do, that we may see, and believe you? What work do you perform? Our fathers ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, 'He gave them bread from heaven to eat.'"*



The disciples remind Jesus that their ancestors were miraculously fed manna, or bread, from heaven as Moses led them through the wilderness.

In verse 32, Jesus responds, *"It was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven; my Father gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven, and gives life to the world."*

That caught the disciples' attention. I love their response, *"Lord, give us this bread always!"*

Jesus said to them, *"I am the bread of life; he who comes to me shall not hunger, and he who believes in me shall never thirst." The Jews murmured about him because he said, "I am the bread that came down from heaven."*

But Jesus was insistent.

"Truly, truly, I say to you, he who believes has eternal life. I am the bread of life. Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. This is the bread which comes down from heaven, that a man may eat of it and not die. I am the living bread which came down from heaven; if any one eats of this bread, he will live forever; and the bread which I shall give for the life of the world is my flesh." (John 6: 47-51)

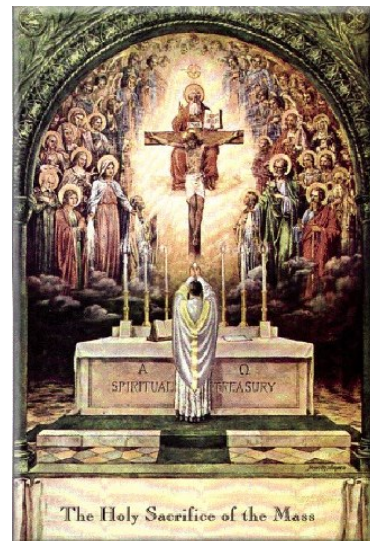
Verse 52 says the Jews quarreled among themselves. *"How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" So Jesus said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink his blood, you have no life in you; he who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day." ... Jesus goes on tell them that unlike their ancestors who ate and still died, whoever would eat this bread would live forever. (Verse 58).*

Wow! It was obvious to me that Jesus was not speaking figuratively, as some claim. He repeats once again that he will literally give of Himself, and that we, as literally, take Him into ourselves. This teaching was so controversial that the scripture tells us that many disciples abandoned Jesus at this point (verse 66).

Jesus doesn't beg them to come back by claiming he was speaking only figuratively. Instead, He asks the Twelve: *"Do you also wish to go away?" Simon Peter answered him, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life; and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God."*

It was inconceivable to me that some early followers would abandon Christ over the Eucharist if Christ had intended to teach that the bread and wine were only symbols. It was also clear to me from studying church history that **all** the Fathers believed that Christ was present, body and soul, in the Eucharist. Even the earliest churches to abandon Rome, the Orthodox groups, still cling to this essential truth.

The more I studied about the Eucharist, the more I desired it. "Lord, give me this bread always!" I have heard many of my Protestant friends and family members say they left the Catholic Church because they "got nothing out of Mass." Instead, they sought Protestant services, which, admittedly, can be more entertaining with vibrant music and charismatic preachers. Yet, there is no sermon so spellbinding, no music so uplifting, and no fellowship so endearing that could ever replace receiving the body and blood of Jesus! There is no substitute for it and those who fully understand it could not live without it. I believe that those who have left the table of the Lord did not ever completely understand what happens on the altar



I spent hours studying the salvation issues that have sadly divided Catholic and Protestant Christians. It would take far more space and time to write my impressions, but I found the Catholic position to be more consistent with all of scripture and the writings of the church fathers closest to the apostles.⁵

⁵The church has always taught that "works righteousness," the idea that we are saved by our works, is blasphemous. Without God's grace, I'd be hopelessly lost. But it is also true that as God graciously offers his salvation to me, it is my responsibility to accept it and cooperate with God by striving for a life of

The Protestant view is that salvation is external. In other words, God declares one righteous by that person's declaration of faith, not by a change in lifestyle or behavior (although any true conversion, they insist, will lead to a changed life). The "saved" one may be just as dirty inside, but is made clean and righteous, by Jesus Christ on the outside. Protestants declare the "total depravity of man" while the Catholic view is that people, while born with original sin, are basically good and can be made inwardly holy by the Holy Trinity working within them.

In 1999, our family was received into the one, holy, catholic and apostolic faith. Finally, home!

Initially, some things about Catholicism frustrated me. Parishes were large, thus there wasn't the fellowship one finds in small, evangelical congregations. I was not impressed by what seemed to me a lack of knowledge about the Bible. Catholics didn't sing and they wanted to rush through Mass. Some wouldn't even stay through the last song and rush out the door as if this one hour with Jesus was more than they could take. (And I'm still trying to figure out which Vatican council excommunicated the final verse of every hymn!)

But I soon found I was rushing to judgment. The longer I associated with Catholics, the more I discovered one could find all types of people among the faithful. Indeed, the strength of the church is its diversity.

There is an interior spirituality among Catholics that is difficult to find in an evangelical community, which depends primarily on Bible reading for spiritual growth. There's obviously nothing wrong with Bible reading; the Bible should be our main source for God's written word. But Catholic spirituality includes not only the Bible, but also the writings of the church Fathers, the saints and the mystics. The word of God comes in beautifully written ancient prayers and song, even in works of art. I find great solace in the writings of the saints and the ancient prayers of the church.

But joining the Church, as in the case of many people, does not mean there would not be trials or disappointments. Almost exactly one year after we joined, my wife informed that she no longer wanted to be Catholic – or married. I moved to Boise to accept a position with the newspaper there. Attending Mass alone was very difficult, particularly

holiness. As St. James noted, we show our faith by our works. Faith, working in love, leads to salvation. It's love, not faith, which endures. (1 Cor. 13). The view of some Protestants that we are "born again," merely by reciting a prayer asking Jesus into our heart is not found in scripture. Scripture teaches we are born again by water and the spirit -- baptism. It's not just saying, "Lord, Lord," that brings salvation, but hearing and acting on the word of God (Matt. 7:21-23) and persevering to the end (Matt. 24:13) Some evangelicals teach that once one has said the "sinner's prayer" and sincerely believed it, there is nothing one can do to lose that salvation. That seemed entirely inconsistent with Romans 11:22-23, Heb. 10:24-31 and 2 Peter 2:20-22, scriptures that tell about Christians who have accepted the truth and then returned to former ways. Other scriptures that were helpful to me were Matt. 25:31-46, Luke 6:46-49, Romans 2:3-8, 13; Phil. 2:12-13, Eph. 2:8-10; 1 Cor. 9:27, 1 Cor. 13; and 2 Cor. 5:10.

as a new Catholic, but my desire to receive the Eucharist was always present, even if I did not fully understand what was happening in my life.

A friend, sensing my sadness, referred me to a retreat for widowed or divorced Christians called "Beginning Experience." You are not supposed to go there with the idea of finding potential marriage partners, but that is what happened to me. It was there that I met my current wife, Sharron. We look back and laugh at the fact that we met at a monastery. Sharron, a revert to the faith thanks largely to the Cursillo movement, and I married on June 19, 2004, after three years of dating.

My ongoing conversion ultimately led me into pursuing ministry and ordination to the permanent diaconate. On Oct. 24, 2015, Bishop Peter Christensen of the Diocese of Boise, ordained me a deacon.

My journey for a faith home has finally ended. Now, the journey is one toward a heavenly home. Through the church and her sacraments, there are many helps along the way.

Is the church perfect? In its dogmatic teachings, yes, but even church leaders, as human, are sinners. Indeed, the church's history includes two or three popes that make Mormonism's Smith look pure as snow. But despite corruption and scandal, which began in the church during Jesus' days, the essential doctrine has been preserved.

When one considers all the attempts from within and without to destroy the church, the fact that it has survived these nearly 2,000 years, and vibrantly so, is a testament to its truthfulness and a fulfillment of Jesus' promise that the gates of hell would not prevail against it.

For all I have experienced, I am grateful to God, for the undeserved grace He constantly gives me. I have found in my conversion to Catholicism, not an attitude of superiority -- "my church is better than yours" -- but a greater appreciation for all God's children, no matter their faith.

I would be presumptuous and guilty of judgmentalism if I pretended to know who will be in heaven and who won't. Indeed, one of the reasons I am Catholic is the teaching of the church that says we will all be judged by what's in our heart; by how we love God and love others and not the religion to which we subscribe. I was disturbed to hear some Protestants tell me that Mormons were going to hell because of that church's teachings. A fundamentalist radio preacher in my hometown regularly tells both Mormon and Catholic callers they're on their way to hell unless they adopt his very narrow view of scripture.

I believe the Catholic Church is the one founded by Jesus. Its sacraments bring grace to the lives of those who receive them in ways that cannot be received elsewhere. But I also believe that Jesus died for all, not just Christians and certainly not just Catholics. I believe God loves us so much that He sent His only begotten son to die for us that we would have everlasting life. (John 3:16.) He constantly pleads for our salvation by

sending His Spirit into our hearts to prick our conscience, by sending His written word, by establishing His church as the bulwark and foundation of truth and by sending his followers and strategically placing them in our lives.

Why did I knock on the doors of so many believing Christians in Australia? Why did a believing aunt send me faith-filled letters and Christian literature? Why did I attend a wedding where above the altar was a scripture that would change my life? Why did I find that years-old, unread book written by a preacher that very early in my life touched my heart? Why did I follow his request to go back and read the Gospel of John? Why did I feel such a deep stirring in my heart before the tabernacle in Catholic churches? Why did a 13-year-old daughter suggest we attend a Catholic Mass?

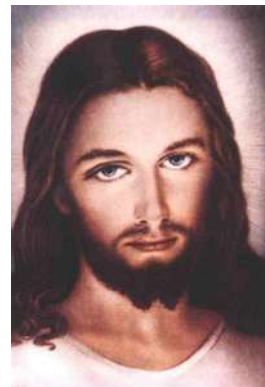
Some may contend all that is coincidence. I don't think so. It all happened for one reason only: Because God loves me! He loves me -- and you -- with an agape love that I cannot even begin to comprehend.

God wills that not one of his sheep be lost. (I Tim. 2:4, Matt. 18:12-14) Our loving Father sends no one to hell. People, tragically, choose to go to hell by living a life of outright rebellion against God or a life without God.

In 2000, Pope John Paul II called the church to conversion and renewal. Many responded, but we have a long way to go. I have decided to write about my personal journey more as a message to my Catholic brothers and sisters than to anyone else. What a force the church could be in the world if more Catholics were truly converted to Christ! We have such a treasure in the sacraments of the church, in the writing of the church fathers and the saints. We need to learn our faith and then share it with others.

Too many Catholics take their faith for granted. They are baptized and confirmed, but never converted. The Christian life is just beginning, not over, when we are baptized and confirmed into God's family.

I've experienced a lot of "religion" in my life. But, ultimately, the most significant conversion is not to a religion, but to Jesus Christ as the God-Man. That is my greatest and ongoing conversion.



Not long after leaving Mormonism and accepting Jesus as the great "I AM" of Exodus 3:14 and John 8:58 and Revelation 1:18, I came across a poster that hangs in my home office to this day.

In the center in all white letters are the words "I AM." And surrounding it are the many scriptural titles for Jesus:

"And thou shalt call his name Jesus, Prince of Peace. Mighty God. Wonderful Counselor. Holy One. Lamb of God. Prince of Life. Lord God Almighty. Lion of the Tribe of Judah. Root of David. Word of Life. Author and Finisher of Our

Journey Home
Gene Fadness

*Faith. Advocate. The Way. Dayspring. Lord of All. **I AM**. Son of God.
Shepherd and Bishop of Souls. Messiah. The Truth. Savior. King of Kings.
Righteous Judge. Light of the World. Head of the Church. Morning Star. Sun
of Righteousness. Lord Jesus Christ. Chief Shepherd. Resurrection and Life.
Horn of Salvation. Governor. The Alpha and Omega."*

No wonder that during that 2001 Mass, on the 20th anniversary of my conversion to Christianity, that it was the Creed that struck me most: "We believe in ONE God, and in ONE Lord Jesus Christ, God from God, Light from Light, and True God from True God." Amen!