



October 2023 CHNewsletter

From Cradle Catholic to Agnostic to the Priesthood by Fr. Larry Gearhart.....	1
A Note from JonMarc.....	4
Starting from Scratch by Jeffrey Shott.....	8
Influenced by Ignatius.....	10

THE COMING HOME NETWORK INTERNATIONAL

Journeys Home

From Cradle Catholic to Agnostic to the Priesthood

By Fr. Larry Gearhart

I'm what's called a "revert." Although I'm a cradle Catholic, I became an agnostic at the age of 18. Twenty years later, at the age of 38, I had a conversion experience that ultimately reordered my life. I returned to the Church five years later, at the age of 43. In the process of my reversion, I did a lot of soul searching and studying of what the Church actually teaches.



From Birth Through High School

I was born Lawrence Michael Alderson to George W. Alderson and Audrey Ann Alderson (née Morin). My mother was in nurse's training at the beginning of 1948. In those days, the trainees were expected to train in every aspect of nursing, including the operating theater. This turned out to be too much for her to handle. She needed to get away from it all to take stock of her life. (Years later, however, she became an LPN.)

She and my father "went away" for a couple of weeks. When my grandfather found out about it, he insisted that they get married. His oldest daughter was a Sister of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary, and his oldest son was a Jesuit who had been a POW in a Japanese prison camp. Both

were highly regarded in the community. The embarrassment my mother's situation presented was more than he could handle.

They married in late January of that year. I was born a couple of weeks early, a breech birth, in late November of the same year. The doctor who assisted in the delivery was shocked to discover this. In those days, there were no instant anesthetics, which made for a tricky delivery.

My father, who had been born in 1925, was a former Marine, having served in World War II. I imagine the war experience was a bit much for him, because later he had difficulty holding down a job. In order to make ends meet, my mother also worked.

My brother, Robert, was born in late December of 1952. I have a memory of living with my paternal grandparents during the weeks that my mother was in recovery. There was one day, when I was alone with my brother, and I noticed that

Continued on page 2 ➡

...Journeys Home Continued...

he needed his diaper changed. When my mother came home, she was shocked to discover the situation, because I had tried to handle the dilemma, but I was too young to do it correctly. I'm guessing this was the last straw for my overworked and unsupported mother, and my parents separated. Shortly after that incident, my mother, brother, and I moved in with my maternal grandparents.

I was enrolled in kindergarten at St. Eulalia in Maywood, Illinois. In the middle of my fifth year, my mother's younger sister, Joan, separated from her husband. At that point, my mother and her sister decided (perhaps with some urging from my grandparents) to get an apartment together.

Growing up, I loved to investigate things. One year, around the 4th of July, I bought a road flare. Out of curiosity, I ignited it in the apartment. I wasn't wise enough to figure out how to put it out in a safe manner, and I ended up burning a hole in the living room rug. The apartment owner was, of course, upset, and we found ourselves moving again.

I remember living in an apartment in Franklin Park, where we lived next door to my future cousins. They told my mother about Elmer John Gearhart, who was shy and unmarried. My mother took it to heart, and shortly after that, the two were married. In 1961, Elmer adopted Bob and me. This is how I came to have the last name of Gearhart. From that point on, we lived in his house in Elmwood Park. At first, I went to St. Cyprian School in River Grove. But after juggling expenses, I was transferred to Elmwood School in the middle of seventh grade. It was there that I began to show unusual ability in mathematics.

The July after our move, my brother John Elmer was born. Around that time, I took entrance exams for Holy Cross High School and Elmwood Park High School. In the latter, I tried to figure out the formula for the volume of a sphere. I ended up also doing well in English and science.

I joined the wrestling team in my freshman year, as well as the freshman boys' chorus. In a school of about 900 students, I

was only 5 feet 2 inches in height and third string in wrestling. In my sophomore year, my voice was changing, so I was not accepted into sophomore chorus. In place of that, I decided to take a typing class. I also set aside wrestling for chess club.

Around this time, my parents' marriage was failing. My father had a drinking problem, and I was asked by my mother's lawyer to testify in court. I said I could not say he was an alcoholic, which I understood to mean that he had an addiction. I couldn't go so far as to say that. Anyway, they divorced in the middle of my junior year.

My mother, brothers, and I moved to Northlake, and I was transferred to Proviso West High School in Hillside, a larger school of about 3,600 students. Around that time, I experienced a growth spurt, and by my senior year I was 6 feet 2 inches tall.

While attending this new school, our college prep English class read Milton's *Paradise Lost*. That book challenged me to think about free will. I had taken classes in chemistry and physics, and I could find no reason to believe that free will was a reality, since my understanding seemed to imply that all motion was either determined or random. Life so far seemed to concur, and I could not see how a soul would be an exception, much less a body-soul combination.

From Junior College to Ph.D. and Assistant Professorship

I attended Triton Jr. College, where I studied English Rhetoric, Hans Morgenthau's *Politics Among Nations*, Humanities, and Calculus. I financed it all by working summers at the National Tea Potato Packing Plant.

Meanwhile, I decided to stop attending Mass.

At the end of those two years at Triton, I was surprised to receive a tuition scholarship to study math education. I decided to attend the University of Illinois at Chicago (then referred to as the University of Illinois at Chicago Circle). In the last quarter of my senior year, I did student teaching. There, I became frustrated that I could not motivate seniors (who were

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

FOUR WITNESSES: THE EARLY CHURCH IN HER OWN WORDS

BY ROD BENNETT

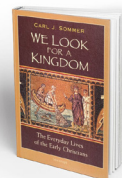
With all the power and drama of a gripping novel, Rod Bennett takes readers on a journey of discovery of ancient and beautiful truths through the lives of four great saints of the early Church—Clement of Rome, Ignatius of Antioch, Justin Martyr, and Irenaeus of Lyons. #2595 • \$21.95



WE LOOK FOR A KINGDOM

BY CAROL SOMMER

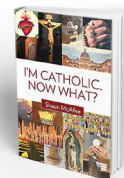
Carl Sommer presents a popular study of the faith and life of the early Christians in the first two centuries after Christ. Using documentary evidence and archaeological records, Sommers reconstructs the lives of the early Christians in order to introduce the treasures of early Christianity to modern readers. #3089 • \$13.97 (limited supply)



I'M CATHOLIC. NOW WHAT?

BY SHAUN MCAFFEE

Welcome to the Catholic Church! Now that you're officially a Catholic, you are probably wondering, "Now what?" Shaun McAfee has been where you are. As a convert, he worried that he might not be a "good Catholic." He shares some of the things that were most helpful to him in becoming grounded as a new convert. #3256 • \$19.95



afflicted with senioritis) to pay attention in calculus class. I was so upset that I didn't bother to attend graduation ceremonies. I got my B.S. degree but did not apply for certification.

When I graduated, our country was at war. But I drew a high lottery number, and thus avoided being drafted into the Army. Instead, I got a job working for UPS while I tried to sort things out. I have a highly technical background and have had an abiding interest in physics, psychology, philosophy, major literature, and history ever since high school. Later in life, I developed a practical interest in biology, especially as it relates to human welfare, both physical and moral.

As a sort of "renaissance man," I had developed a great interest in many things, including literature and philosophy. During this time, I became fascinated by Bertrand Russell's *History of Western Philosophy* and *Why I Am Not a Christian*.

Then, in 1971, I took the GRE (Graduate Record Exam) and scored in the 98th percentile in mathematics. In my first year, I was one of the top students. The following year, I became a teaching assistant in the math department, and thanks to that, I was able to finance the remainder of my education through the doctorate level.

I investigated several options for connecting with a thesis advisor, including inquiries about their areas of specialization. I finally settled on working with Prof. James Moeller. (Jim was a Lutheran who decided not to challenge my free-will theory. As it happens, he later happily wrote a letter of commendation to Mt. St. Mary's Seminary, where I applied for entry in 1997.) While working with Jim, I was given the problem of determining the relationship of the spectrum of a unilateral shift operator (also referred to as a translation semigroup) of infinite multiplicity to that of its infinitesimal generator. I derived that result somewhat late in the academic year, yet earlier than had been anticipated, so that I was given a job as a visiting lecturer (the bottom rung of professional titles) at the University of Illinois at Chicago. During that year, I was able to use a theory of harmonic analysis of operators on Hilbert space to discover and prove an important version of what came to be called (at least initially) Gearhart's spectral mapping theorem.

My first job elsewhere was as a visiting professor at Wright State University in Fairborn, Ohio. There, I was able to submit my first major publication to the *Transactions of the American Mathematical Society*. That paper has been cited more than 200 times in the mathematical and physical sciences (especially chemistry and physics) literature.

My Conversion Process

It was during that three-year period at Wright State University when I connected with Center Stage in Yellow Springs, Ohio, and participated in a few Gilbert and Sullivan operettas. In 1979, after my three-year term was up, I began working for defense industry contractors. My involvement with Center Stage continued. After one of these productions, I dated a fan who was a few months older than me, and with whom I had an affair lasting several months. She had a teenage son. I proposed marriage to her, but she declined it. After that rejection, I became seriously depressed and attempted to deal

with it by using pornography.

Finally, in 1987, the year my maternal grandmother died, I had a major conversion experience one night while I slept. I believe my grandmother's prayers played a major role in my being given that gift. In the dream, God showed me where my life was headed, the consequences to many souls who would have been adversely affected, and a taste of the result—my separation from God for all eternity. That experience shook me up so much that, when I woke up, I got down on my knees and begged God for forgiveness. The only consolation I got was that I was not yet damned, and recognized that I needed to change.

My first change was to get rid of all the pornography in my possession. I began thinking more responsibly about my life and my job. But I still didn't have a sense of the truth of the Judeo-Christian tradition.

It was a confusing time, and I tried marriage—which ultimately ended after about seven months. My wife was from Illinois as well, so I applied to Bell Labs in Naperville, a job from which 2,000 engineers, including me, were eventually laid off.

In the months after this fiasco, I sought employment and connected with a lady who was a parishioner at a Catholic church in St. Charles, Illinois. She was in their choir, and I was interested in participating. I heard the pastor speak about the Christ Renews His Parish program (colloquially referred to as "CHiRP"), which was sponsoring a weekend retreat. I consulted him about joining that retreat, and he referred me to Fr. Steve, the pastor at Holy Cross in Batavia, where I lived. I talked to Fr. Steve, who was very busy, but I had an impulse to ask him to hear my confession anyway.

That weekend blew me away. Another retreatant that weekend was a guy my age, whom I knew, who had also attended St. Eulalia's and lived on the same block as I did in Maywood back in the 50s. At that meeting, I spoke about my recent return to the sacraments, and my newfound conversion. (Another coincidence: I sat at the St. Paul table.) The guys there were all impressed, including one fellow at our table who was entering the seminary the next year. That retreat was an important part of my journey back to the Catholic Church, and ultimately to my vocation.

In the summer of 1992, I moved back to my old home in Elmwood Park and spent the next three years under spiritual direction. Thanks to some local contacts, I managed to find work as an adjunct professor at colleges in the area.

My mother insisted we go to St. Vincent Ferrer parish for Mass, even though we had been going to St. Cyprian years before. After a couple of months there, I heard that Fr. Benjamin Russell, the pastor, was available to provide spiritual direction. It was only later that I recognized the significance of consulting with a man whose first name was the same as that of my maternal grandfather and my Jesuit uncle, and whose last name was the same as my previous intellectual hero, Bertrand Russell.

Fr. Russell helped me to put things into perspective. I had some wild questions to ask him, like: "What if there is intelligent life on other planets?" More importantly, we explored the

A Note from Jon Marc



Dear Friends of the CHNetwork,

In the Catholic tradition and liturgical calendar, October is a month of saints, angels, and Our Lady Queen of the Holy Rosary. It is a month whose traditional Catholic themes present a challenge to many Protestant converts and inquirers to the Catholic Church. For many, the Catholic faith just has a lot more “stuff” in it—too many people

and things that some Christians suspect are in competition with God for our attention.

Resolution of this issue goes far beyond explanation of any individual point of doctrine about Mary’s Immaculate Conception or Perpetual Virginity, any apologetic arguments for prayers to dead people, or explanations about how the repetition of Hail Marys as part of the Rosary is not (necessarily) the “vain repetition” that scripture condemns. What is really at play is the underlying paradigm or lens through which Catholics and Protestants (and others) look at all such questions. Catholics have a fundamentally “sacramental” worldview, which former Presbyterian minister, Dr. Kenneth Howell describes thus:

A sacramental view of the physical world, however, sees God as choosing to use material reality as conduits of divine grace. Christ alone forgives sin—it is certainly true—but Christ has chosen to use the waters of baptism to convey His forgiveness and His regenerating power. The Catholic Church does not, as is sometimes ascribed to it, believe that water, bread, or wine have some inherent magical power in and of themselves. Rather, the Church believes that this divine arrangement is grace building on nature. The natural world embodies and conveys divine grace. And this is the real difference between a sacramental view of reality in Catholicism and the modern mindset of much of the West in which natural reality is just bare and brute fact. (5 Essential Conversions, CHNetwork.org)

Catholicism holds that God’s love is such that He precisely desires and chooses to overflow into his creation—into holy men and women through whom he works his will and into physical signs and symbols of the faith that become sacramentally efficacious sources of grace. Ours is a God who is not only not stingy, but who positively delights as a father to bring forth the full-flowering of his kingdom through the cooperation of his children.

The Holy Scriptures drip with this sacramentality from beginning to end, the height of which is of course the Incarnation—God taking on human flesh in a particular time and place in history. God chose to work the wonder of the

Incarnation through Mary—her choices, her actions, her intercession—and as a result her “soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord” (Lk 1: 46-55) for all ages. So too, Our Lord Jesus chose to use physical things—water, dirt, spittle, fish, bread, wine—to be the means through which he imparted grace and healing. Furthermore, through His Church we believe He has given us the permanent gifts of His own continued presence and grace through the waters of baptism, the oils of anointing, the physical embrace of marriage, and pre-eminently in the bread and wine which become His own body and blood in the Holy Eucharist.

Through the lens of the “sacramental worldview”, much of what initially seems foreign or strange about Catholicism begins instead to take on new and beautiful significance. God chooses and indeed delights in building upon nature with His grace—revealing himself through the beauty of the created world, scandalously working through particular people and events in time, instituting physical signs (sacraments) that effect what they symbolize, and raising up holy men and women whose prayers and works are, yes, POWERFUL—not because of who they are, but because of who God is.

St Thérèse and the “Big and Little Things”

The saints as an entire communion constantly recall us to the reality of this abundant and overflowing fatherly love of God and to the way He chooses to communicate that love through a beautiful diversity of different personalities, times, and places. Far from making saints cookie-cutter copies of one another, the holiness that comes from cooperation with God’s grace makes every saint unique—even more “themselves” than they could ever be by themselves. God invites those who will listen and follow Him to radical holiness and world-shaking mission—but only in and through the particular life, relationships, responsibilities, and circumstances that He has given and allowed.

A great saint we memorialize on the first day of this month is St. Thérèse of Liseux, affectionately known as “The Little Flower of Jesus”. Thérèse was born in Alençon, France in 1873 to Louis and Zélie Martin, loving Catholic parents who themselves were recently declared saints as well. Thérèse was a precocious child, zealous (and indeed impatient) to enter the religious life and to do great things for God. She is known for her spirituality of “The Little Way,” born out of her lifelong journey of growing in humility before God and her desire to do everything—however small, humble, menial—out of love for Jesus.

One insight that emerges from Thérèse’s writings and example is that since our works and merits are not about us but rather about God’s grace and His will working through us, there are—at least in one important sense—no “big” and “small” works in the kingdom of God. There are only “little things”—for all of our

DO YOU HAVE A JOB OPENING AT YOUR ORGANIZATION?

Please remember our members when you have a job opening. Often times clergy converts are looking for positions within the Church as well as the private sector. Please email job openings to info@chnetwork.org.

human works are ultimately little—done with great love for God and neighbor, and done by means of God’s great love working in and through us. She writes: “**You know well enough that Our Lord does not look so much at the greatness of our actions, nor even at their difficulty, but at the love with which we do them.**” (Thérèse of Lisieux, *Story of a Soul*)

There are no big or small, significant or insignificant personalities, gifts, talents, privileges, or challenges—just the ones God has given to you and to me. The question is how we will respond? Thérèse’s response was to embrace everything, however small, as an opportunity to love: “**Miss no single opportunity of making some small sacrifice, here by a smiling look, there by a kindly word; always doing the smallest right and doing it all for love.**”

Thérèse’s “Little Way” is a perennially powerful reminder of this fact: our path to holiness, our way of the cross, is through the apparently little things in life. Every thought, word, action, or inaction can be surrendered to Jesus and carried out for His glory and our neighbor’s good.

A Few “Little” Reminders

In the spirit of embracing God’s desire to work through his children AND the fact that he is often calling us to precisely that which seems “small”, “ordinary”, and “mundane”, let me leave you with a few small reminders and invitations:

Pray for our Retreatants: we have converts and journeyers going on retreat this month. We ask for your prayers for them, believing as a team that your intentional, purposeful intercessory prayers are one of the most powerful things in the universe. Why? Not because they are magic words. But because God calls us to pray and chooses to work through our prayers. THANK YOU to all of the faithful prayer warriors who read this newsletter!

Support the Newsletter: COMPASS is the community of many faithful, monthly donors to the CHNetwork who make our mission possible, and in a special way support this newsletter as one of our core ministries. Whether you are being called to give in a “big” or a “little” way, know that we are just grateful to be partners with you in making these newsletters and conversion stories freely available to pastors and laypeople that are on the journey home to the Catholic Church.

Ask for Help: One of the greatest gifts we can give to others is precisely the opportunity for God to work through them in helping us! If our team can be praying for you, and especially if you are on the journey to Catholicism and could use resources, advice, fellowship opportunities, or just a friend to discuss your faith journey with, please contact us at info@chnetwork.org.

As always, thank you for your prayers and support. May God bless and be with you today!

Onward and upward, in Christ,



JonMarc Grodi
Executive Director



Like many of the folks who watch *The Journey Home* program on EWTN, my wife and I are lifelong Catholics. I grew up in a faithful Catholic family, went to Catholic schools for 8 years, and never considered leaving my faith. I’ve attended many Bible studies and retreats to keep my faith growing, and my wife and I raised our kids in the Church. On the few occasions when we had to move to a new town our first priority was to find our parish and get plugged in.

It must have been just over twenty years ago that I discovered The Coming Home Network and *The Journey Home* program with Marcus Grodi on EWTN. Initially, I would watch it by myself, but I later discovered that my wife was also interested in the program. We never cease to look forward to Monday nights when we tune in and watch people from so many backgrounds who all have one thing in common.

Somehow, through both natural circumstances and supernatural interventions, these people are being spoken to by God, and through all of these ways and means of speaking, the Holy Spirit is telling them all the same thing: Become Catholic! There are so many twists and turns in all these stories, but ultimately they lead each person to one place: the Catholic Church.

It wasn’t long after we began learning about the important work of the CHNetwork that we felt we should become monthly donors. We were learning so much ourselves, and we were seeing how many people were being helped, so we decided to step up and support this work. That was 19 years ago and we have given ever since.

I’ve known cradle Catholics my whole life and so many are deeply devoted to our faith. But there is something about the energy and zeal of converts. We constantly hear of their struggles and trials—many of them risking and losing everything to become Catholic. As they make their journey to the Catholic Church, they bring so much love for Jesus with them.

It’s a personal joy to us to know that our gifts help provide counsel, care, resources, and much-needed assistance to help guide these dear people home. We want to encourage everyone reading this to join us in giving frequently and even monthly to ensure that the CHNetwork continues its important work. ■

Vern & Pat Berg have been monthly donors to the CHNetwork since April of 2004. If you would like to join them, and become a partner in our mission with a one-time gift, or a monthly gift to COMPASS, visit us at chnetwork.org/donate.



Houston, former Methodist pastor

As a former Protestant pastor, after seeing the United Methodist Church of my birth torn asunder by schism over the right interpretation of the Word of God, I am happy and thankful that I have found refuge in the one, holy, Catholic, and apostolic Church. I am thankful that Christ indeed has been faithful in His promises to preserve the Church, that the gates of Hell will never prevail. I am thankful to have received the grace to indeed believe that God is powerful enough to guide the Church through 2,000 years of history in retaining the Deposit of Faith with sound doctrine through the ministry of the Church's magisterium. I am thankful that Christ continues to sustain the Church through the real presence in the Holy Eucharist and the power of the Holy Spirit. I am thankful and looking forward to being fully received into the Church in late November 2023 during the Feast of Christ the King and finally receiving the true Eucharist. ■

Thomas, former Episcopalian

Having completed two Ignatian Caminos in Spain, another Ignatian Camino that recreated Ignatius' physical journey to Rome became my tipping point and calling. I was received into the Catholic faith just prior to Easter, grabbed my backpack and boots, and headed to Spain. This Camino-time, I felt at home, being warmly welcomed as a fellow Catholic, and (this time) I was literally walking to Rome as a Catholic. The experience was overwhelming, though I had traveled much of the Ignatian paths before, but this path was anew, fresh, and I felt a peace that said to me, "Welcome Home." ■

Terry B., Catholic "revert"

God used a job to bring me to the Catholic Church initially through driving a Senior to Sunday Mass. Although I'd attended the Catholic Church for the first 18 years of my life, it suddenly seemed like something new and rich. I soon started attending daily Mass while also stumbling on a local Catholic radio station. I'm convinced I'd be divorced after 30+ years if those two things hadn't happened. It's still a complicated story, but I'm grateful to CHNetwork for providing stories of brothers and sisters who have put words (to my experiences). ■

**Do you have an update on your journey to share with us?
Send it to info@chnetwork.org.**

COMPASS

SUPPORT THE CHNETWORK!

Join **COMPASS** — an ever-growing community of donors who give a monthly gift of \$10-\$100 (or more) to support the CHNetwork as we help to guide men and women who are coming home to the Catholic Church

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www.CHNetwork.org/Compass

Please contact Ann at 740-450-1175 or via email ann@chnetwork.org if you have any questions or concerns.

EWTN'S THE JOURNEY HOME on television & radio, hosted by JonMarc Grodi, CHNetwork Executive Director



TELEVISION

Mon. 8PM ET—Encores: Tues. 1AM ET, Thurs. 2PM ET
The Best of The Journey Home: Sat. 6PM ET

RADIO

Mon. 8PM ET—Encores: Sat. 7 AM ET, Sun. 1 AM ET and 5 PM ET
The Best of The Journey Home: Mon.–Fri. 1 AM ET

Monday, Oct. 2

Dr. Kathryn Wehr

Former Anglican

Monday, Oct. 9

Mother Petra

Former Wesleyan

Monday, Oct. 16

Kathryn Whitaker

Former Evangelical Protestant

Monday, Oct. 23

David Dean

Former Presbyterian

Monday, Oct. 30

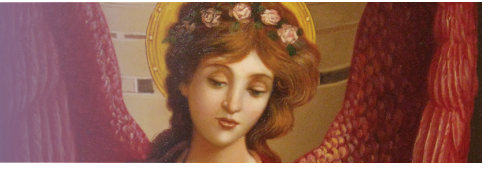
Kevin Shinkle

Former Nazarene

Schedule is subject to change.

To access the full archive of past *Journey Home* programs go to chnetwork.org/journey-home

Prayer List



Clergy

- **For Thomas, a former Episcopal priest** recently welcomed into full communion with the Catholic Church and discerning his future as a Catholic.
- **For Glen, a Methodist pastor** deeply troubled by what he sees happening in his denomination, finding himself drawn to explore the Catholic Church but fearful of all that this would mean for his family, sense of calling and employment.
- **For Kelvin, a former Baptist minister** who is doing a wide reading of Catholic theology and apologetics and seeking answers to his remaining questions.
- **For Michael, a former Hindu and current director of a Baptist ministry** to the homeless who wants to become Catholic but knows he will certainly lose his job if he does.
- **For Michael, an Anglican priest** who very much wants to become a Catholic priest of the Ordinariate of the Chair of St. Peter, that the Lord will make the way clear for this.
- **For David, a Protestant academic** who has decided to leave his teaching position to enter the Catholic Church and is concerned about how he will make a living.
- **For Michael, a Protestant seminarian** who began reading the Early Church Fathers, left the seminary and is entering the Catholic Church.
- **For Phillip, a former Protestant minister** who made the decision to enter the Catholic Church this past Easter Vigil, that the Holy Spirit will guide and inspire his family to follow the path he has taken.
- **For Jeremiah, an Evangelical pastor** struggling deeply with how he would

make a living and support his family if he were to leave his current position to become Catholic.

■ **For Leonard, the pastor of an independent Protestant Church** who over many years has come to the truth and beauty of the Catholic Church and is asking the Lord to help him discern his future.

■ **For James, a Baptist pastor** who has resigned his ministry and moved his family to a new city where he has a new job, that the Lord will bless him as he attempts to enter the Catholic Church and lead his family into the Church as well.

■ **For Phil, an Evangelical missionary** working in a foreign country who finds himself drawn back to the Catholic Church in which he was baptized and raised and is concerned that the mission would suffer if he and his wife were to leave it.

Laity

- **For Jeremy, a Non-denominational Evangelical in Texas**, that the Lord would strengthen him both physically and spiritually and guide his path Home.
- **For Joost in the Netherlands**, that the Holy Spirit may guide him as he journeys back the Catholic Church.
- **For Bryan, a Baptist in Oklahoma**, that his interest in the Catholic Church would blossom and bear much good fruit in his life.
- **For Samuel, a member of the Church of Christ in Texas**, that, as he reads and studies Catholic authors, the Lord would give him a hunger for Jesus in the Holy Eucharist.

■ **For Robert, an Episcopalian in Tennessee**, that any and all obstacles in the past of his journey to full-communion with the Catholic Church may be cleared away.

■ **For Berian, a Baptist** in a difficult situation, that the Holy Spirit may conform his relationships with the will and mind of our Lord Jesus.

■ **For Bradford, a member of the Church of Christ**, that his family may come to accept his interest and journey to the Catholic faith.

■ **For Jeremy, a Pentecostal Holiness brother in Louisiana**, that he may find loving and accepting Catholics who will support and encourage him.

■ **For Andrew, a Non-denominational Evangelical in Minnesota**, that the Holy Spirit would grant him the grace to be able to cross the finish line into the Church.

■ **For Michael, an Anglican in the United Kingdom**, that through his study and prayer he may joyfully arrive at the Eucharistic Altar of our Lord Jesus.

■ **For Daniell** who is on the journey, for guidance about beginning OCIA this year.

■ **For Camrey, a Methodist**, for good health and for family unity as she makes her journey home to the Church.

■ **For Bryn, a Non-Denominational Christian**, for marital unity in regards to the faith that they desire to raise their children in.

■ **For Carol, a Presbyterian**, for guidance on a path to enter the Church and for consolation in the waiting.

■ **For Patty, a Baptist**, for family and friends to have an open heart regarding her and her husband's news of becoming Catholic.

“For me, prayer is a surge of the heart; it is a simple look turned toward heaven, it is a cry of recognition and of love, embracing both trial and joy.”

St. Thérèse of Lisieux—Feast Day: October 1

Starting from Scratch

By Jeffrey Shott

When I converted from atheism to Christianity, I had to start from scratch. I had to answer the most basic, practical questions: *What exactly am I supposed to believe now? Where should I go on Sunday mornings?* I tried to answer these questions by seeing what other Christians had to say about them, but I quickly discovered that they all disagreed. This realization led me to ask what would become one of the defining questions of my life: *How are Christians meant to resolve theological disputes?*

My first thoughts turned to the Bible. After all, Christians all agree that the Bible is the Word of God. If we agree that this book is from God, shouldn't we all believe what it says and point to its teachings if there is ever a dispute? This seemed logical. However, I soon learned that practically every theological dispute in Christian history has been about what exactly the Bible means. To further complicate matters, I also discovered that Christians disagree not only about what the Bible means, but also about what it even *is*. While Protestants say the biblical canon consists of 66 books, Catholics say there are 73, and Eastern Orthodox tend to argue a number closer to 76. That's a total difference of ten entire books.

Notably, though, Christians tend only to disagree about the Old Testament canon. We all agree that the same 27 books make up the New Testament. Realizing this, I reasoned that if I could figure out why Christians all agree on the same 27-book New Testament canon, I might thereby discover the means through which we could all come to agreement about what they mean. Now, one might think Christians

all agree about the New Testament canon because it's found in the New Testament itself. However, this is not the case. The first fully enumerated New Testament canon in the historical record is found in the writings of the fourth-century bishop of Alexandria, St. Athanasius. It is also in the fourth century that we see Christians coming together for the first times to answer the canon question in an official capacity, such as at the councils they held in Hippo, Carthage, and Rome (I should note that these same councils also affirmed the Catholic 46-book Old Testament canon).

This was a crucial discovery because one cannot appeal to an authority (like the New Testament) until one has identified what it is (that is, the canon). Once I found out how we know what the New Testament *is*, I wondered if it told us how Christians are supposed to resolve our disputes. I found a couple of interesting passages that shed light on this issue. In Matthew 18, I read that Jesus gave us a protocol for resolving disputes: first, address the issue in private; next, bring one or two fellow Christians into the discussion; finally, take the dispute to the Church. If someone refuses to listen to the Church, treat them as an outsider. The reason why the Church's judgement was considered definitive is also disclosed in this passage, since right after Jesus explains this protocol, He proceeds to give the Apostles the power to "bind" and "loose" as "in heaven" (v. 18). I learned that "binding" and "loosing" were technical terms used for a Rabbi's authority to interpret Scripture. Jesus not only gave the Apostles such authority, He also guaranteed that what they bound or loosed would be bound or loosed

"(I)t is not necessary to seek among others the truth, which is easily obtained from the Church. For the Apostles, like a rich man in a bank, deposited with her most copiously everything which pertains to the truth..."

St. Irenaeus of Lyons, 130-202 AD



in Heaven. That is, He told them He would make sure they always used this authority in a way that accurately reflected His will.

This was the protocol followed by the Apostles themselves in Acts 15, during what has been called the Council of Jerusalem. When a dispute arose over whether or not Gentile converts needed to be circumcised, the issue was taken to the Church, headed by Peter and the Apostles, and they rendered a judgement, and then proceeded to draft a document detailing that judgment which they then promulgated to the faithful. The dispute was settled. The Church had spoken.

This led to another question: *Which Church?* After all—as I discovered with the canon of Scripture—one can’t appeal to an authority until it’s been identified. I reasoned that if all Christians agreed upon what the early Church said about the identity of the New Testament canon, I should figure out what they said about the identity of the Church. I soon discovered their method of identifying the true Church: apostolic succession. The early Christians taught that Jesus gave authority to the Apostles, and this authority was passed down to their successors, called “bishops.” For example, St. Ignatius of Antioch—one of our earliest and most reliable sources of early Christian belief and practice—quite strenuously emphasized the necessity of living in union with and in submission to one’s bishop:

See that you all follow the bishop even as Jesus Christ does the Father, and the presbytery as you would the apostles; and reverence the deacons as being the institution of God. Let no man do anything connected with the Church without the bishop. Let that be deemed a proper Eucharist, which is [administered] either by the bishop, or by one to whom he has entrusted it. Wherever the bishop shall appear, there let the multitude [of the people] also be; even as, wherever Jesus Christ is, there is the Catholic Church. It is not lawful without the bishop either to baptize or to celebrate a love-feast; but whatsoever he shall approve of, that is also pleasing to God, so that everything that is done may be secure and valid” (St. Ignatius of Antioch, *Epistle to the Smyrnaeans*, chapter 8, circa AD 110).

* * * * *

“Keep yourselves from those evil plants which Jesus Christ does not tend, because they are not the planting of the Father. Not that I have found any division among you, but exceeding purity. For as many as are of God and of Jesus Christ are also with the bishop. And as many as shall, in the exercise of repentance, return

into the unity of the Church, these, too, shall belong to God, that they may live according to Jesus Christ. Do not err, my brethren. If any man follows him that makes a schism in the Church, he shall not inherit the kingdom of God” (St. Ignatius of Antioch, *Epistle to the Philadelphians*, chapter 3, circa AD 110).

This made logical sense to me. If I was to take my disputes to the Church, I needed a way to identify it without already knowing who was right. Just like I don’t need to agree with a particular president to know that he is the president or who came before him, I can similarly identify a bishop who has apostolic succession regardless of my personal theological beliefs. Apostolic succession gives us an objective means of identifying the true Church.

Yet, what if a schism takes place between bishops who all have apostolic succession? What then? How do you know which side is the true one at that point? The early Church had an answer for this as well. They reasoned that since the Apostles had a leader, Peter, so too would his successors be the leaders of the bishops. They identified Peter’s successor as the bishop of the see where Peter was martyred: Rome. Today, we call the bishop of Rome the pope.

“For to this church [Rome], on account of its more powerful preeminence, it is necessary that every church (that is, those who are on every side faithful) resort; in which church ever, by those who are on every side, has been preserved that tradition which is from the apostles . . . In this order, and by this succession, the ecclesiastical tradition from the apostles, and the preaching of the truth, have come down to us. And this is most abundant proof that there is one and the same vivifying faith, which has been preserved in the Church from the apostles until now, and handed down in truth” (St. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies III:3*, AD 180).

Thus I discovered that one can only know what the New Testament canon is by appealing to the early Church; and, upon reading the New Testament, one discovers that it directs us to take our theological disputes before the Church for judgment—and the same early Church that tells us what the New Testament is also tells how to identify the true Church: it is the one with apostolic succession and headed by the pope—or as St. Ignatius of Antioch calls it, the Catholic Church. ■

Jeffrey Shott is a former atheist who appeared on The Journey Home in July 2023. An expanded version of this article can be found at jeffreyscott.com



INFLUENCED BY

IGNATIUS

St. Ignatius of Antioch—Feast Day: October 17th

Many of our members who express interest in the Catholic Church have come to us because along the way they've discovered the testimony of the early Church Fathers. And one of those witnesses whose name comes up more often than not is St. Ignatius of Antioch, who hails from the city where the disciples "were first called Christians." (Acts 11:26)

At the beginning of the 2nd century, St. Ignatius was arrested for his faith, and while being transported to Rome to be martyred in the arena, he composed a number of letters, which are among the most reliable original writings from the early Christian tradition.

St. Ignatius has a particular impact on those Christians who had previously thought that there wasn't much to know about the first few generations of believers. Discovering how eloquently and faithfully he defends the Gospel – and how specifically he refers to teachings held by Catholics to this day – can be a real eye-opener to someone seeking the Church at Her origins.

Here are a few testimonies from our archive of written conversion stories, testifying to the impact of St. Ignatius on their journeys of faith:

"I had no idea that writings from the disciples of the Apostles existed. It was equally shocking to read what they had to say about the authority and structure of the Church. St. Ignatius of Antioch, a disciple of the Apostle John, said in AD 107, 'You all should follow the bishop as Jesus Christ does the Father... Let no one do anything that is proper for the church without the bishop. Let that Eucharist be considered valid that is under the bishop or performed by one to whom he entrusts it. Wherever the bishop appears, let there be the fullness [of the church] as wherever Christ Jesus appears, there is the catholic church.' I became convinced that the Bible and the earliest accounts of Christianity in the world were profoundly Catholic, not Baptist, in their structure."
–Noel Culbertson

"Reading the earliest Church Fathers, especially St. Ignatius of Antioch, I found a full expression of the Eucharist as the Body and Blood of our Lord. One quote from Ignatius especially moved

me: 'I have no taste for corruptible food nor for the pleasures of this life. I desire the bread of God, which is the flesh of Jesus Christ, who was of the seed of David; and for drink I desire his blood, which is love incorruptible...' The utter beauty of the experience of God's love, as described in the Fathers, still stirs my soul."

–Deacon Eddie Ensley

"I was introduced by my husband to what (St. Ignatius of Antioch), in the very first century after Christ had to say about the Eucharist: 'They have no regard for charity, none for the widow, the orphan, the oppressed, none for the man in prison, the hungry or the thirsty. They abstain from the Eucharist and from prayer, because they do not admit that the Eucharist is the flesh of our Savior Jesus Christ, the flesh which suffered for our sins and which the Father, in His graciousness, raised from the dead.' How Catholic does that entire quote from the very first century sound! I was blown away by reading these early Christians and learning that it was possible to experience the Christian life just as they described in their writing—not in my Baptist church, as I had always imagined we were closest to the New Testament Christians, but in the Catholic Church!"
–Sharon Plascencia

St. Ignatius of Antioch's strength of teaching is compounded by the fact that he was born in the first century, and had direct connections to the apostles. Ignatius was head of the Church in Antioch, where only a few decades before, the faithful in that city had been led by St. Peter himself. Tradition also tells us that St. Ignatius was mentored by St. John the Apostle.

For a Christian who's given little thought to the practical life of the generation of believers who succeeded the apostles, discovering Ignatius can be an extraordinary experience.

We have many more stories of our CHNetwork members who've been impacted by the witness and teachings of St. Ignatius of Antioch! You can find those, as well as hundreds of other testimonies from Catholic converts, in our written conversion story archive at CHNetwork.org/story. ■

question of what God was calling me to do. I kept praying about this, and even met with a vocation director at the local priory. The night before I got the news that I wasn't accepted, I had a dream that I was on a train. The conductor came to me and asked me for my tickets. I only had one. I simply had to figure out what vocation the "ticket" was for.

That three-year period of discernment ended in 1995. I was running out of options to support myself. Out of the blue, I got a call from an old employer in the Dayton area, asking if I was available for work.

Mary, Help of Even This Christian!

I moved back to Fairborn and discovered that I was within the Mary, Help of Christians parish boundaries. I registered as a parishioner and soon joined the Stephen Ministry, which works with people going through difficult times in their lives. I had some hard cases and learned a lot from the experience. When I inquired about whom I might seek as a spiritual director, I was sent to Fr. Joseph Goetz, the pastor of St. Paul Church in Yellow Springs. He suggested I begin to pray the Liturgy of the Hours. He was surprised how determined I was to keep praying the Liturgy of the Hours, as well as consistently receiving spiritual direction.

In my second year there, I served on the parish council. Management was never my strong suit, so I was not involved beyond that. I was, however, knowledgeable in psychology, and I was learning a lot of history and theology. Coming from the Chicago area, I had visited the Cathedral there a few times to pray, and I learned that Joseph Bernardin was the Cardinal Archbishop, and that he had previously been the Archbishop of Cincinnati. I volunteered to give a presentation on him, and when I completed it, the lady who directed the ministry asked me, "When are you going to become a priest?" She urged me to meet with the pastor, Fr. Joe Raudabaugh.

When I met with him, I said I was interested in becoming a deacon. He asked me, "Is there any reason you would not study to become a priest?" I had no answer. Was this the "one ticket" that God had for me?

I attended a ministry weekend at Mount St. Mary's in Cincinnati. The rector at that time was Fr. Jerry Haemmerle. He found me gazing at a painting outside of the chapel. It's a picture painted by Benjamin Robert Haydon, entitled "Christ's Entry into Jerusalem." Fr. Jerry explained that two of the figures in it were modeled on Isaac Newton (a mathematician and physicist) and Voltaire (an atheist). It seemed like I was being given a life-line by Sir Isaac Newton, mathematician: choose faith over no faith. That clinched my decision to enter the seminary in the fall of 1997.

When I told my brother, Bob, about my decision, he responded, "Whatever floats your boat!" I entered the seminary at Mt. St. Mary's in Cincinnati in 1997 and was ordained as a priest in 2003.

I was 48 years old, the oldest in my seminary class. The next oldest was John Daniel Schuh (Dan). When people asked me how old I was, I would answer that I was two years older than Grandpa (a humorous reference to Dan). When we were

ordained (May 24, 2003, the feast of Mary, Help of Christians), as we were leaving the Cathedral (now a minor basilica), one of his grandchildren spotted him and yelled out "Grandpa!" That's how he got his nickname.

My mother, brothers, aunts, uncles, and cousins attended the ordination. At the dinner following the ceremony, two of my uncles roasted each other. Everyone had a great time.

The next day, I celebrated Mass at Mary, Help of Christians. A week later, I said Mass at St. Eulalia's in Maywood. Two ordinands a year ahead of me eventually went on further than I did. One is the current rector of the Seminary, Fr. Anthony Brausch, and the other now leads the diocese of Columbus, Bishop Earl Fernandez.

Prior to my serving as parochial vicar for the Springfield Deanery (beginning in July of 2017), I was the pastor of the four small Catholic parishes in Champaign County, Ohio: St. Michael in Mechanicsburg and Immaculate Conception in North Lewisburg (since July 1, 2006) and, more recently (since July 1, 2013), St. Mary in Urbana and Sacred Heart in St. Paris. St. Mary's is small by U.S. Catholic standards, and each of the other three parishes is small enough to be considered "small faith communities" by biblical standards. Accordingly, they have been able to live something close to the ideal of small faith communities. Everyone knows everyone else and feels comfortable engaging in serious conversation.

Since November of 2020, I have been a priest living in retirement. Today, I am a retired priest in residence at St. Teresa of the Child Jesus parish in Springfield, Ohio. My duties include daily Mass, hearing confessions, responding to sick calls (anointings, hearing confessions and general pastoral care), and presiding at baptisms, weddings, and funerals. As previously, I remain a "circuit rider" in the sense that I may be called upon to substitute for a priest on vacation or some other form of leave. I have come to realize that God is more loving, forgiving, and (as Einstein said) subtle than I ever imagined. His grace is often like a soft flute, leading the soul onward. That subtlety certainly played out in surprising ways in my own journey home and into the priesthood. Indeed, it led me all the way back home, to where my vocation and Jesus Christ were waiting. ■

Fr. Larry Gearhart was born Lawrence Michael Alderson on November 19, 1948. He is the first of two sons of George W. Alderson and Audrey Ann Alderson. Larry and his younger brother were cradle Catholics. Their parents separated shortly after the birth of another brother, Robert. In 1960, his mother remarried, and Elmer John Gearhart adopted Larry and Robert in 1961. In 1962, another brother, John Elmer, was born. At the age of 18, Larry became an agnostic. A year after receiving a Ph.D. in mathematics, he taught math at Wright State University. In 1987, he had a conversion experience that set him on a road back to the Church and to his vocation to the priesthood.

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