

The Quist's Journey into the Catholic Church

On the last Sunday of March 2004, I stood before my congregation, Calvary Lutheran Church of Edmonton, Alberta, where I had been pastor for nearly 12 years, and read my letter of resignation to the shocked assembly of 230. I assured my beloved parishioners that this was not a rash decision, but the result of a protracted period of prayer, reading, suffering, conversation, and fasting. Almost exactly a year later, on the last Saturday of March, 2005, my wife, Carol, and I, together with our children (Jonathan 17, Kari 15, and Kirsten 11 at that time), stood before 2500 people at the Easter Vigil Mass in St. Patrick's Cathedral, Melbourne, Australia to be received into full communion with the Roman Catholic Church. We still marvel at God's gracious goodness in leading us toward such a blessed and unexpected turn.

My wife and I are of Scandinavian Lutheran stock. I figure there hasn't been a Catholic in the family since the Reformation (with the exception of my wife's father's cousin, who married a Catholic after his first wife's death and subsequently became Catholic). We were both about as Lutheran as you can get. I grew up in a Swedish Lutheran family in Wisconsin. My maternal grandfather was a Lutheran pastor as were both my maternal uncles. I have numerous pastors among my cousins and in-laws. Carol grew up in a Norwegian Lutheran family in Canada. Her oldest brother and his wife are both Lutheran pastors, one sister is married to a Lutheran pastor, the other sister is married to a one-time Lutheran youth director, and her youngest brother used to be a Lutheran pastor (until he was received into the Catholic Church in August, 2006). We both attended Lutheran Bible schools and colleges.

Carol and I got to know each other while serving on a traveling music/public relations team from the Lutheran Bible Institute in Seattle, Washington. We were married in 1982. Carol had completed her BA (Communications major from Concordia College in Moorhead, Minnesota, 1980); so she worked to get me through school. I received a bachelor's degree in biblical studies (Trinity Lutheran College, 1983 near Seattle), a Christian Studies graduate diploma at Regent College, Vancouver, BC ('83-'85) and a Master of Divinity degree at Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota.

After my ordination (1988) we moved to Calgary, Alberta for my first call as a pastor. Sixteen years of fruitful parish ministry ensued (four years in Calgary and 12 in Edmonton). Our family was growing (Jonathan – 1987, Kari – 1989, and Kirsten – 1994); our faith in Christ was growing; my preaching was touching people; we were content in Lutheranism, perhaps even proud to be Lutheran. Having our kids in a Catholic elementary school only confirmed my resolve that I would die a Lutheran (the depth of catechesis my kids received there was not inspiring).

However, certain events in our lives and in North American Lutheranism raised some niggling doubts. In June of 1990 I traveled from Calgary to St. Olaf College in Minnesota to attend a conference called "A Call to Faithfulness." This meeting, sponsored by three independent Lutheran journals, addressed the problem of *Liberal Protestant Drift* that seemed to be infecting the sister communions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in

America (ELCA) and Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada (ELCIC). Even back in the early '80s the biggest challenge facing faithful Lutherans was the push from many leaders to normalize homosexuality. At "A Call to Faithfulness" I met many devout, faithful, and well educated Lutherans who worried about the state of the ELCA and ELCIC and strategized together about how to bring the ship back on course – to steer it toward theological and confessional integrity. One of the more prominent among those faithful Lutheran leaders was Richard John Neuhaus. Just months after that conference Neuhaus announced that he was becoming Catholic – a defection (as we viewed it then) that really rocked the boat. What some Lutherans were realizing was that, without the moorings of the Church's Magisterium and faith in sacred Tradition, Lutheranism would inevitably drift towards moral and theological relativism.

Nonetheless, my colleagues and I were convinced that Rome was not the direction to go – that crossing the Tiber would only muddy the clear waters of the gospel of justification by faith. We felt that we didn't need Rome's hierarchy and eschewed the rules that seemed to hem in freedom and dampen faith. We were certain that God's grace, as revealed through the Word of God (both Scripture and Christ himself), and explained in the Lutheran Confessions, is enough to keep people firm in faith and discipleship.

Now of course, Lutheranism is not monolithic – there are many varieties of Lutheran, running the gamut from low church, evangelical types (who do not wear clerics and, with the exception of infant baptism, look and worship much like Baptists) to "Evangelical Catholics" (who look and worship in a manner which appears more Catholic than what one finds in many Roman Catholic parishes). The version of Lutheranism that I was formed in was somewhere in the middle of that range. However, in the mid 90's I felt drawn to a group which was more evangelical catholic in their worship style and ecclesiology.

In 1997 a pan-Lutheran ministerium called "The Society of the Holy Trinity" (STS) was organized to work for "the confessional and spiritual renewal of the Lutheran churches."¹ This society calls its members to obedience to Jesus, to praying the daily office, to practice of personal confession and absolution and to providing the same for their parishes. Furthermore, this ministerium expressly states that the Lutheran movement's ecumenical destiny is reconciliation with the bishop and Church of Rome. Joining this society brought significant and positive changes to my personal piety and practice of ministry. As I attended annual general retreats of the Society and semi-annual regional retreats I began to look more catholic and wanted to take my parish in that direction. I started to ask the question put to every Lutheran by the German theologian, Peter Brunner, "Why am I not a Catholic?" It wasn't long after I joined the STS that my Lutheran bishop (Joseph Robert Jacobson), who had retired early from ministry, announced that he was becoming a Catholic. Another defection?

Around this time things were stirring for my wife, Carol, as well. In October of 2002 she went with her father to a Lutheran conference on Christian sexuality in Kansas City, Missouri. She heard inspiring lectures by prominent and faithful Lutheran scholars.

¹ www.societyholyltrinity.org

However, the speaker who touched her the most was the lone Roman Catholic, Fr. Jay Scott Newman (pastor of St. Mary's Catholic Church, Greenville, S.C.). Having heard the best of the Lutherans, Carol was surprised to feel the most moved by Fr. Newman. There was beauty, unity, and a cogent logic to Catholic teaching on sexuality. There was also something attractive, even compelling about the authority with which Fr. Newman spoke. After his lecture, Carol told him, "You make me want to be Catholic." Fr. Newman simply smiled. The next morning (Reformation Sunday!) Fr. Newman was the guest homilist in the Lutheran church that hosted the conference. He spoke with great sorrow of the divorce which occurred between Catholics and Lutherans in the 16th century. Carol shed tears as she went forward to receive communion while Fr. Newman sat, present but unable to receive. Never before had she felt the ache of separation between the Lutheran communion and the Catholic Church so keenly.

When Carol got home from the conference and told me about Fr. Newman, I knew that I had to get to know him. Soon I was sending him emails, asking the typical questions about Mary, the saints, the pope, purgatory, etc. Fr. Newman gave me good answers, but more importantly he suggested authors who got me thinking: John Henry Newman, Scott Hahn, George Weigel, Thomas Howard, and so on. The stack of Catholic books on both sides of our bed grew higher and higher. Of course all of these books pointed in one direction – to Rome. Carol took a couple of courses at a local Catholic college and was introduced to John Paul II's encyclical, *Veritatis Splendor*. When she learned that the title means "The Splendor of Truth" she was moved to tears because deep down she knew: despite what postmodern culture asserts, there is such a thing as truth and it is splendid.

God also used a significant degree of suffering to help shake us loose. After all, I wasn't anxious to leave a parish that was appreciative of my ministry and which paid me well by ecclesial standards (on my salary alone we managed to pay the mortgage on our three bedroom bungalow and maintain a modest lifestyle). I used to joke with my colleagues that if I ever left the ministry I had no idea what I would do since I had no marketable skills. As my longing to become Catholic grew, that little quip ceased to strike me as funny.

2003 turned out to be the most difficult year of our lives. Not only was I feeling less and less sure that I could remain a Lutheran, we underwent great stress in the areas of health, finances and relationships. In July of that year, I started to manifest symptoms of what would turn out to be chronic pelvic pain – a spasmodic condition affecting the muscles of the pelvic floor. For quite a while I feared that I had cancer. In October we put a good deal of borrowed money into an investment that went bad (months later we got our money back with minor losses, however for a while it looked disastrous). Plus, Carol had a severe falling out with someone close to her. All of these stresses, along with the lack of confidence we felt in our Lutheran leadership, brought us to one of the darkest times of our lives. And yet, in the midst of it all we had the sense that God was with us.

The moment of clarity came when we attended a weekend conference organized by Catholic Family Ministries in Edmonton on a bitterly cold November weekend in 2003.

Christopher West presented a two day seminar on John Paul II's *Theology of the Body*. During a very dark period of our lives the pope's teaching appeared as a beacon of light and hope. John Paul's catechesis about the nature of human love and the meaning of marriage and sexuality astounded us with its evident truth, beauty and goodness. We were convinced that Catholic theological anthropology – which recognizes the grievous wound of sin resulting from the Fall, but which teaches that man is still good, indeed glorious, in that we image God – is true and biblical. This was a far cry from the pessimistic anthropology we had believed as Lutherans (orthodox Lutherans believe that there is nothing good left in fallen human nature, that we are totally corrupted and incapacitated by sin). During the Saturday lunch break we introduced ourselves to Christopher West and told him that I was a Lutheran pastor and that we were both feeling drawn to Rome. He encouraged us to – like our Lady – keep saying yes to God's call.

That Saturday night, when the conference was over, we lay in bed and wept. We wept because we had been exposed to such beautiful teaching and felt touched by the Lord. We wept because we knew that we had to become Catholic and that this was going to cause great turmoil in our lives. And we wept tears of contrition because we came to realize that we had been duped by our culture about contraception. We grieved because ten years prior I had undergone a vasectomy. Also, that night Carol sensed a strong call to study the *Theology of the Body*. Over the weeks that same sense of call grew in me.

The ensuing months were a blur of activity – exchanging emails with Fr. Newman, Christopher West, and others who helped us on the journey; reading Catholic teaching with renewed vigor; visits to the doctor; and trying to figure out how we could study and what we could do for a living. I was particularly drawn to pray before the Blessed Sacrament in a chapel devoted to 24 hour adoration (sometimes at 3 or 4 in the morning). For Christmas we bought each other Rosaries and started praying to Our Lady. In January it became clear that I didn't have cancer, but instead a chronic pain condition – but not something that was going to kill me. In March we got our money back and paid back our loan. But even before that, a hope (and later a plan) was developing to study at the John Paul II Institute for Marriage and Family.

Shortly after hearing the *Theology of the Body*, we presented a video series on the same at our Lutheran church. However, it wasn't long before we realized that we couldn't smuggle Catholic teaching into a Lutheran congregation, nor could we remain Lutheran. So on Sunday, March 28, I read my letter of resignation to my parish and revealed our plans for the future.

Early in July we plan to fly to Melbourne, Australia where we will both study for master of theology degrees in marriage and family at the John Paul II Institute of Marriage and Family. When Carol and I first heard the Theology of the Body (last November) our hearts burned within us. We knew that we had to share this good news with the congregation. But more than this we knew that we must study more. We long to be in the forefront of the battle for marriage and families. We are convinced that this beautiful theology of the body is the remedy for the

confusion and wounds of our culture of death. We hope to return to the Edmonton area in two years, well equipped and eager to teach.

Within three and a half months of reading this letter we had sold our house (of which we had half equity), paid off some debts, received our student visas, moved to Australia, and started studying. We didn't know anyone in Melbourne, didn't know if we'd have work when we got back to Canada, and weren't entirely positive that we had enough money to make it through two years. But, we did have a strong sense that this was God's call.

Going to Melbourne to study at the John Paul II Institute was the best and the hardest thing we have ever done. We were nourished and stimulated by our classes and will always cherish the wonderful friends we made in Australia. There were many times we were brought to tears during Mass by the palpable presence of Christ in the Eucharist, or by the cogent preaching of our pastor, Monsignor Peter Elliott (who was also the director of the John Paul II Institute and has since been ordained a bishop). Many faithful priests graced our dinner table, sharing their wit and wisdom. We got to know and love faculty, staff, and students (most half our age); our wonderful sponsors and their families; Dominican and Capuchin brothers and priests; friends we met through Catholic movements and through special graces of God. We enjoyed the Aussie warmth and sunshine, a nice respite from the long, bitter winters of Alberta. It was fun to see a bit of the countryside and to spot an occasional kangaroo, koala, possum, or rainbow lorikeet.

But it was also tough. I struggled with chronic pain and we both were pushed to the limit to complete our course assignments (Carol earned a master of theology degree in Marriage and Family, while I worked towards a pontifical master's in the same field). Our kids did amazingly well by God's grace, but keeping up with them and their schooling (part of the time home-schooling) was a significant challenge. Money was tight and would have run out early if it were not for the help of Providence, incarnated in the generosity of a few people. God knew how much we could be tested, and always in the nick of time he came through with the grace, strength or finances that we needed.

The highlight of our trip and greatest joy was being received into full communion at St. Patrick's Cathedral, Easter of 2005. Becoming Catholic required that I write to my former Lutheran bishop. Here's an excerpt from the letter that I emailed to him three days before we were received into the Church:

On more than one occasion you've used the metaphor of a campfire for the ELCIC and urged us to stay put – that we need to hear from all the voices around the campfire. I think that is an apt metaphor. We and all the other protestant denominations have been huddled around our respective campfires out in the wilderness, having left or been driven out of the city on a hill. Around our campfire I have found warmth and comfort. I have found love and friendship. I've learned to pray. I have enjoyed a rich tradition of hymnody and liturgy. My fellow campers have introduced me to Jesus and taught me to think theologically. Indeed, as a pastor I've had my turn at song leading and telling the Story around the fire (a great joy and privilege for which I will always be grateful). But a

campfire isn't home and camping is only provisional – it's not to be a permanent condition. Eventually campfires go out and everybody goes home. And I've heard the voice of Mother calling me. At least for me, it's time to go home.

One week after our reception into the Catholic Church our beloved Pope, John Paul II died. We were so very grateful to have him as our Holy Father “officially” even if it was only for a week. We cried with the rest of the world at the passing of John Paul the Great, but we also rejoiced when Cardinal Ratzinger was elected pope and took the name of Benedict XVI.

We are so thankful that we were able to make this journey together. To be able to move together as husband and wife, and to have our children freely and joyfully join with us was a tremendous blessing. Along with some intentional catechesis at home and theological discussion between Carol and myself and visitors, each of our children received individual graces or calls from God. Jonathan experienced a mystical call from Mary in 2003 when, on a three-month foreign exchange program in Europe and while vacationing on the Spanish island of Mallorca, he joined a throng in an Easter procession to the Cathedral. Kari was stirred by the Catholic Church's teaching on abortion (particularly in light of Lutheran equivocation on the matter). And Kirsten, who at eleven we figured would move most easily to Catholicism, but who actually found it the hardest, was finally moved by teaching our family received on the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

While still in Australia, on the feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe, I was able to undergo a successful surgery to have my vasectomy reversed. While we are thankful for a good result, still the repair lacks the elegance of God's original design and I continue to live with pain (not as a result of the surgery, but related to my chronic condition). I offer up that pain for the salvation of souls and in reparation for the sin of vasectomy.

We returned to Edmonton in August 2006 and I started work as the director of the Marriage and Family Life Office for the Catholic Archdiocese of Edmonton a month later. I will soon complete my thesis and hope to defend it in Rome in November 2008. The blessings continue. Two of Carol's five siblings have become Catholic, and a few of our dear friends (former parishioners) have also been received into the Catholic Church. It was my joy last Easter to be the sponsor for a young man who was received into the Church (along with his older brother and parents) whom I had baptized as an infant when I was his pastor.

When our two year sojourn in Australia ended we were exhausted and broke, but we had tremendous joy and gratitude. Real estate doubled in Edmonton while we were gone so we don't own a house anymore. But we have no debt and God continues to provide generously for us. Everyday we are thankful for the many undeserved graces that we continually receive through Mother Church. She is a bottomless well of refreshment, - unfathomable, an endless source of living water. Her sacraments, her papal encyclicals, her catechism, her canon law, her social teaching, her saints, her religious orders and lay movements all bring us into deeper relationship with Christ and call us to holiness. There was some sacrifice in our move to the Catholic Church, but it pales in significance to the

treasure that is ours. We have discovered the pearl of great price - the fullness of Christ's Church and the deposit of faith.