

“Goin’ Roman . . . NOT: One Anglo-catholic’s Failed Journey to Rome”

As a convert to High Anglicanism from the Evangelical Protestant world, and especially as a student of the Oxford Movement and its nominal leader the Rev Mr J H Newman, it was very nearly a guarantee that at some point I would feel compelled to ask, and hopefully confidently answer, the question of “Should I go Roman?” Oddly enough, I had two major instigators besides the denominational context just mentioned: an atheist, and a Roman.

My oldest and dearest friend is a devout atheist, though of an open-minded and historically sensitive nature toward Christendom. What with his having been raised in Lima within an extremely rich traditional Roman environment, he (albeit indirectly) influenced me somewhat toward giving Rome positive consideration. On the other end was a dear Roman friend who had more or less followed my denominational progress from the Southern Baptist Convention to the Presbyterian Church USA (PCUSA) to the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States of America (ECUSA). His early journey had almost paralleled mine in that his starting point was the PCUSA, followed by a few years in the ECUSA. For him doctrinal purity became a major issue long before it did for me. He dates his leaving the ECUSA from two separate but related incidents. First, one Sunday his rector referred to the Resurrection in a less-than-convinced way, so after the service he (my friend) quoted St Paul’s “if Christ be not raised” passage; the rector’s reply was something along the lines of “Well, I’ve never cared much for Paul in the first place.” Then later, in a diocesan news article Bishop Borsch was quoted as saying something to the effect of “I believe in the Resurrection, but I can certainly see why some do not.” Without quite knowing what hit him, his Roman clock began ticking from that moment.

Add to this my almost lusty interest in the Oxford Movement, and God had a definitely unsettled Anglican on his hands. One day, sometime ‘round May or June 1995,—and I think it was in the shower—I remember, in an audible voice, saying to God “Okay! Okay! I’ll go!” Shortly thereafter I (and to some extent Anna) began trying out local Roman parishes, only to find that none of them particularly grabbed me. A dear friend at work was a member of a parish way out on the tip of the Monterey Peninsula which he felt at home at, and since I’d for so long been commuting to St John’s Chapel (Traditionalist) in Monterey, the idea of driving further didn’t bother me too much.

My first act upon deciding that was where I wanted to “pope” was to write a thoroughly unnecessary letter of introduction to the pastor, for said letter was immediately forwarded to the nun in charge of the RCAI, “Roman Catholic Adult Initiation,” program. Those who know better know I’m kidding. It’s really RCIA, “Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults”—probably a holder of a top-5 slot for “most irregular acronym.” But that’s tangential at best.

The nun in charge of RCIA was one Sister . . . let’s call her Sister RCIA. And an Irish Sister RCIA, at that. (Who could’ve asked for better?) After Anna and I met with her and told her our respective life stories, we were formally signed up, and the road was on the show. And what a show it was to be. For me.

The honeymoon stage lasted a few weeks. I was on a weekly basis treated to the company of other so-called travellers to the Holy City, the Church to Which All Roads Ultimately Lead, or Lead From, Whichever One Prefers; a bunch of Truly Good Folk who, nonetheless, struck me as almost strangely consumed with the admitted spiritual milk of those first few weeks. Each and every week, though the surface topic would change (or so

I was told), I was continually bombarded with the soft gooshy message that God loved me. Now who in their right mind would criticise that? you're possibly thinking. Well, I'm not criticising it. Not the message, anyway. The program as there established was unshamefacedly geared toward people with little or no concrete religious knowledge. In fact, the vast majority of the enrollees were cradle Catholics whose religious training very likely ended shortly after baptism. Many had never been confirmed. A couple were Episcopalians, one was a Methodist, some were nothing. So on a purely practical basis I understood why so much milk was being poured on. But only milk, and for so long? When the Bible was studied—and that wasn't often—it wasn't really *studied*; rather, a verse or two would be read (in small groups, of course), and we'd be asked what we thought of it. And of course all thoughts, even wrong ones, were right.

Imagine this carrying on for a month or two. Then one day we were being prepared for the first Rite; the one where the catechumen knocks on the church door and requests to be allowed to join, etc. Pretty cool, actually. But three individuals were singled out as “not ready yet”: one guy who'd not joined until relatively recently, one guy who'd been enrolled but not able to attend too many sessions prior to that point, and ME. When this was announced, I (and this was no doubt bad judgment on my part) replied, volubly, that a discussion between me and the Sister would have to take place first before such a decision was going to be abided by. For one small moment one small pindrop could have been heard. The discussion took place, during which it was explained (quite pleasantly but very definitely in a “this is how it works around here, Logsdon!” sort of way) to me that the delay in regard to me was only because I'd not *actually* joined the group at the very beginning (I, an Anglo-catholic and lifelong practicing Christian, was only about 4 weeks late into a year-long program), and for me and the others a couple quickie sessions on topics already covered would be necessary before rejoining the rest of the group. I swallowed it, then drove home, pissed, but still “with the program.”

The first of these quickie sessions involved some “guided imagery” in which we were to close our eyes and imagine we were a tree in a yard somewhere (maybe the home of our childhood, I'm not sure). Afterward I let out a sigh to Sister and expressed my relief that such an experience was over. This was a mistake. “Don't worry: there's more coming!” she said with a grin. I could almost detect her hand fidgeting in search of a ruler. The next (and last) quickie was on “scripture.” This consisted of a completely disjointed, historically turbulent, wholly unsatisfying trip from Genesis through Revelation with only about four stops in between. The other two fellas seemed lost (and no doubt were); things weren't helped by my having with me my trusty Authorised Version, from which I read aloud, only to be met with blank stares, from both fellow “students” and “teacher.” For some reason, after this session it was determined to mainstream us three once again.

Not long after the reunion of the Not Quite Ready Three with the More Than On Top Of It Rest Of 'Em, a very significant straw was added to this camel's back. I walked in one evening, and saw at the helm one of the RCIA Core Team who I'd been informed beforehand by my friend, co-worker, and recent RCIA graduate, was a specialist in Preschool Education. My churning gut screamed warnings that were to prove all too true before the evening was out. The major exercise that evening was to “go into the next room, where we'd find paper, and crayons, and on which we were each to draw a picture of ‘what the Church means to me.’” As the joyously blinkered damn near raced out of the room, who should She of Preschool Speciality If You Please'm see still sitting in his folding chair, nervously reading the 51st Psalm (Coverdale translation, please)? In reply to her pleasant but bothered look, I said “I'm sorry, but you'll have to forgive me for not being able to do this one . . .” She said “Okay,” and went about straightening her papers,

making some fairly red-highlighted mental notes to be sure. Later, out in the other room where the good little students had dutifully made their crayon pictures, the next assignment was given: "Get together in small groups [knuckles whiten], paste your pictures on a larger piece of paper, and all around the pictures write no less than five words that signify what the Church means to you." In one last attempt to make the impossible work, I joined the edge of a group that seemed like it would be the least hostile toward the token nonconformist, and tried to take part. Once the pictures were pasted, Church-descriptive words began to be bandied about. "Community" (the Great C-Word of Modern Romanism), "Communion," "Love," "Sacraments," "Et cetera." From somewhere inside me came this word through my lips and onto the airwaves: "Authority." It was as if I'd jumped onto the table, dropped my pants, and screamed "Bite me! All of you! But especially you, you, and you!" to judge from the stunned, very nearly shocked, faces that greeted my contribution. I tried to save myself: "You know: Rome . . . the Magisterium . . . Papal guidance . . . the definitive Oracle on what's true and false . . ." I may have actually used some, all, or none of these words. I can't recall. But that was definitely the gist of my attempt to explain to people supposedly trying to become Roman Catholic why I could possibly soil their ears with the word "Authority." A few moments later, the effect wore off, and back they went to their warm fuzziness, comfortably forgetting I was there, once again.

During the next week I wrote up something I wanted to say/read to Sister, knowing full well that unless I went from a prepared script I'd no doubt ramble into dangerous territory. Being very busy, she set up an appointment with me for the next Sunday, an hour before the 10 am mass. At this meeting I read what I'd written. I'd include the text here, but it was long, and I'm not even sure my computer system can call up such an old file, but the gist was "Sister, if I'm going to continue my path to Rome at this parish, I need a more individualised track parallel to the mainline RCIA program, which for all intents and purposes is sending me away, not drawing me in. I need to meet with either a priest, or you, or merely someone who can deal with the sorts of difficulties that a Christian scholar with Protestantism in his blood would have with signing on with Peter and his clan. Etc." She smiled, thanked me for being so honest, said (very likely in drop dead truthfulness) that there wasn't a priest with time available to meet with me (with three priests, two of whom were retired and spent large amounts of their time with their dogs, I tended to disagree), that she'd try to accommodate my needs by relieving me of the necessity of attending all the RCIA sessions, and would, on evenings I wasn't with the main group, meet with me herself on whatever topic the group was addressing. At the time, this certainly seemed better than what I'd been experiencing. What I didn't tell her was that instead of mass that morning I'd already decided to swing back over to my old Episcopal parish for Morning Prayer. I guess I already knew what was coming.

Did I say that about a month or two prior to this point I'd been assigned a sponsor? Considering how I was coming to Rome via Traditional(ist) Anglicanism, those who've known me for a while will not be surprised to find that the fact that my sponsor was, at one and the same time, a woman and a psychotherapist, ticked me immensely. More on this below.

The truth is we met only once, the next week. I was very uncomfortable, and Sister clearly didn't want to be there. I was given the assignment to go home and over the next week to read something from my own library on the topic that evening (prayer, I think). Off I went. I might have went to mass the next Sunday. I can't remember. But what I do remember clearly is that sometime during that weekend I was lying on the couch (trying to do my assignment, for all I recall), and feeling so incredibly eaten up with anguish over

how things had been going on my journey to Rome that I was in physical pain. At some point I broke and said “Okay! I’ll stop.” I grabbed my 1928 Prayer Book, held it to my breast, and somehow felt at peace.

That Monday evening, I think it was, I composed a letter to Sister in which I formally withdrew from her RCIA program, stating as my main reason that “the Rome I fell in love with ceased to exist in the mid-1960s.” I was partly right, and partly wrong. But that’s hardly my point here. Either the next morning or the one after, I got a call from Sister at work, saying she had an updated schedule of miss-able main group sessions for me to make note of, and I said “Sister, have you opened your mail today, yet?” She said “No.” I said “You should.” She said “Okay.” And we hung up. I had no doubt that she had no doubt what that letter contained.

The next Sunday I was greeted at my Episcopal parish by nothing less than a bear hug from then-Associate Rector Alexander T Patience, and the words “Welcome back!” And these words felt even more significant considering how for the last six or so months I had not received the Body and Blood even once.

Here the story ends, or begins, if you so prefer.

An evaluative comment or two are definitely in order. I by no means equate my experience with what it “means” to go Roman. Kadrillions of others do it with absolutely no problem. This was, indubitably, MY experience. I can’t even say that today it would be the same. For one thing, I’d certainly be more circumspect as to which parish I chose. I’d probably even try to meet with the bishop at the outset.

Primarily, though, the hideous tale related above is very personally significant in two major ways. 1: It has, for me, all the earmarks of Divine intervention. I’d reached a point in my Anglican life where I really was worried about whether I should swim, and it seems to me that, in order for me to grow spiritually God needed to get that worry out of my system, and the best way for someone like me was to toss me into it and say “There! Go ahead and see it isn’t my will for you! Then maybe you’ll knock off all that idiotic worry!” 2: It also prepared me, I think, for what life had in store for me, and us. Anna had started the RCIA program with me, but quickly dropped out of both it and church, once again. I had, up till the abortive swim, been a bachelor in church, because Anna, for a variety of personal reasons, hadn’t been able to “do” church. For all we know, God had me get my Roman worry out of my system when I did because he had plans for getting Anna back into his house via the ECUSA soon thereafter. And, indeed, early the next year (1996), one Saturday evening Anna asked me if I’d mind her going to church with me the next morning. I was awestruck. And thrilled. She’s been in church with me ever since, parish-home and ecclesiastical turbulence notwithstanding. Another thing it prepared me for, I think, was (ahem) ordained female persons. It wasn’t so much the nuns who ran the Roman parish I’d nosedived into, but the sponsor I’d been given. Even though I’d have preferred a man, this woman was a decent sort, and very sensitive and considerate of where I was coming from. After I U-turned, she wrote me a wonderful letter the most significant part of which was her statement to the effect of “It seems, Mike, that you’re called to go deeper in your own religious tradition than replace it with another.” She was quite perceptive, because that’s exactly what it seems God had intended. I still consider myself a Confused Anglican, always being pulled either Geneva-ward or Rome-ward, but more or less content where I am, if only because my family is a distinct mix of Protestant and Roman elements that I feel are well-attended to in my current Episcopal world. As if further proof were needed for me that acceptance of female clergy was one of the things

God was preparing me for, our current parish seems to be that proof. Signing on with St George's, Salinas, and the pastoral care of Mother Connie White has certainly been one of the true highlights of my religious life. God bless her.

A final note re Sister RCIA: I don't really want to attribute any ill will to her, so please don't think that what I'm about to say is such. It does, however, seem to me in retrospect that at some point prior to me and the other couple fellas being held back for Special Make-up Sessions, Sister had decided I wasn't the right material. The giving me a female sponsor, the denying me the sort of parallel track I truly needed, the almost relaxed way she agreed to "check her mail" that day on the phone, and, most importantly, **NOT FOLLOWING UP WITH ME ONCE I'D WITHDRAWN**— all seem a bit premeditated. I'm perfectly willing to be wrong, but that's what it seems to me. What would have been wrong with sitting me down and being as honest with me as I'd been with her, and merely telling me she didn't think becoming Roman was the best thing for me right then? Maybe she knew I wouldn't have taken it well. (This, actually, is fairly certain!) Or maybe she simply doesn't work that way. I'll never know.

A final, final note: I really am pulled both ways in my religious and spiritual life, with my point in saying this being that in spite of my Gawdawful experience of trying to go Roman, Mother Church, in true Anglo-catholic fashion, is very important to me. My daily prayers are in accordance with a currently very popular monthly Roman prayer book; but, at the same time, I still enjoy my Calvin and Edwards. And yes, the good ol' Anglican writers as well.

I've bothered you all long (sic) enough. Bless you for reading this far, if you did!