My First Visit to a Non-Catholic Church



Have you heard the term "Catholic guilt?" Do you feel guilty? How guilty would you feel if after attending mass for your whole life you decided on your own to attend a non-Catholic church service? Can you imagine what it was like the first time? Were there really monsters inside the Protestant church? Would God condemn you for doing this?

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By Jim Hill

The thought of ever stepping foot into a non-Catholic church scared me to death. Let me give you some background. I was born into a loving Roman Catholic family is southwestern Michigan. My mother, father, and grandparents on both sides were Roman Catholics. My great grandfather and grandmother, who I knew until their passing when I was thirteen, were Catholic. Most of my aunts and uncles were Catholic. My neighbors on both sides of our farm were Catholic and all of us attended Holy Family Catholic Church in Decatur, Michigan. As a faithful member of the Catholic Church I attended mass every week and on holy days. I worked as an altar "boy," as they used to call

this, throughout my growing up years and continued in this all the way through high school. As you can see I was a faithful Catholic in a Catholic environment and would never consider going to a non-Catholic church. That was at least when things began to change as I joined the dot com boom in the late 1990's.

All I can say now is that God was working on my heart and this led me to consider things which Roman Catholics would consider heresy. First among those things was attending any other church than the one of my upbringing. As a child and teenager when we traveled during the summer on vacation and sometimes down to Florida over Christmas break we would attend whatever Catholic Church was in the area. And when we got there the service was very predictable. Entering the church we would dab ourselves with holy water and make the sign of the cross. Then as we entered the pew we would genuflect towards the altar and sit down. Then the service would play out in front of me as it had hundreds of times before. Sit, kneel, stand; I had it memorized. Nothing new here! But looking back to the end of the nineteenth century I can see that God was working on my heart.

Before I explain about what led me to consider attending another church let me explain how I felt about going to mass. Church was boring to me and to make things fun my twin brother Joe and I would often play some secret games with each other. When we stood he would often begin to press against me with an increasing amount of pressure. I would try and not lean over and balance this pressure by pressing back against him with equal pressure, but in an increasing amount. A game of strength began. As I was stronger than Joe I knew what the outcome would be but I had to stop pressing against him when I was certain that he would tumble over into one of the other members of our large Catholic family. There were six of us kids in total. Another game that we played was to switch the first parts of certain words around and then recite these variations loudly next to each other. For example, instead of saying "grant us peace" we would say, "pant us greace." Another thing we did was to take things literally in the saying of the mass. Specifically, at part of the service went as follows:

> Priest: The Lord be with you. All: And also with you.
>
> Priest: Lift up your hearts. All: We lift them up to the Lord.

Just prior to this Joe and I would ensure that the kneeler was extended because we know what we going to do. Once the congregation said "We lift them up to the Lord," we would then stand up on the kneeler. We were raising our hearts to the Lord. This gave us great joy through the hilarity of it all. To this day whenever Joe and I attend a Catholic mass we chuckle when we get this part of the service. And yes, we still say "pant us greace."

The games that Joe and I played helped us to pass the time in an otherwise boring service. Perhaps one of the funniest things I did was right after receiving communion. At unexpected times instead of returning to my seat I would just continue right on walking out the door and leave. My brother being the more compliant child would never consider doing something as bad as this. But being rebellious

gave me an immense sense of joy and control in an otherwise miserable situation. I haven't even mentioned what I did to get out of going to the mandatory catechism classes. We will leave that for another chapter. The games that we played helped us to maintain our sanity in an otherwise insane situation.

Back to what was going on in my heart in the late 1990's. I began to have an increasing sense that things were not right in the Catholic Church as God continued to work. By this time I was living in Royal Oak, Michigan and attended Saint Mary's on 730 South Lafayette street (if you are interested). At this particular church they began to have a time of fellowship after the service at which coffee and donuts were served. Being a fairly outgoing person I hoped to meet some people and make a diligent effort to socialize after the service. Despite my best efforts all ever got from anyone there was a shy hello and possibly a passing mention about the weather. Needless to say this wasn't very encouraging to me. As God continued to work I began to realize that the vast majority of us were completely disconnected from each other in the church. I would come to mass faithfully every week hoping to connect with others and every week I would experience the same coldness that I had grown used to at my hometown church in Decatur, Michigan. One day I attended Saint James Catholic Church in Ferndale and I made a realization. I could be an ax murderer, child rapist, or psycho killer and even if I attended the same Catholic Church year after year nobody would ever know anything about me. In fact I had attended Saint Mary's in Royal Oak for five full years! Even though I wasn't any of those things, look out people, do you realize who is sitting next to you? Yes I had an increasing sense that things were not right in the Catholic Church.

"For all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23).

Radio played a big part in the work that God was doing in my heart. One day I was at home in my condo in Main Street Square on the south end of Royal Oak where all the other yuppies lived. I had a fancy shortwave radio that I had bought from one of my employees since I had always had a fascination with such things. As I was scanning through the dial I came across a wacko radio preacher named Brother Stair. What he said didn't really interest my but what did happen was that it made me be able to listen to other radio preachers. On some subsequent night I came across a radio station on the AM dial, AM 560. At some point when listening to this station and most likely in my SUV on the way to work I heard a lady teaching the Bible. She was from a church called Five Points Community Church in Auburn Hills, Michigan. The program was entitled something like "Ladies Radio Bible Class" and honestly the lady on there didn't have the best radio voice. But I remember that she was teaching about King David and even though this was geared towards women I was interested in listening to it. It was through this radio program that God really began working in my heart.

"For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 6:23).

As God continued to work in my life there wasn't really a culminating event that led me out of the

Roman Catholic Church, but there was one particular incident which marked my last trip into the Church. It was a Saturday and I had made plans with my friends to go to dinner in Royal Oak and hang out was our habit in those days. We were going to meet up town just shortly after five o'clock and I figured that I would be able to make the Saturday afternoon mass as Saint James on Woodward Avenue in Ferndale since this started at 4:00. I drove down there and as I crossed the Pleasant Ridge speed trap I began looking for Saint James on the right. I found a parking spot and went inside. As I began to go through the motions of the service I began to look around to my right and to my left. I looked and saw people standing there who were just as dead inside as I felt. They were just going through the motions of the senseless religion and did not have even the slightest concern for me or anyone else for that matter. I began to wonder if I began to have some sort of psychic breakdown if anyone would even care. At some point just after the ridiculous message by the father called a "homily" I just got up and walked out. I didn't care who saw me or what anyone said to me, which of course no one did. And that was it, this was the last time I attended a Catholic mass under the compulsive teachings of the Church.

Sunday came quickly after spending many hours in Royal Oak. I liked to frequent a place called Woody's and as I remember that was where we spent the night. One thing we used to enjoy was watching for rats in the alley. We were frequently not disappointed. But as Sunday dawned I began to think about driving up to the church that hosted the woman on the radio program that I had heard on AM560. During every show she always mentioned the time and location of the Sunday service. So why not drive up there as give it a shot? I hopped in my Ford Explorer, shot up to Auburn Hills, quickly located the church and pulled into the parking lot. That's as far as I got. As the time for the service approached I just couldn't bring myself to go into the church. I was quite sad about this, but after sitting in the lot for about half an hour I decided to go on home.

On the following Sunday I was set that I was going to go to church today. I got in my truck once again and found Five Points Community Church in Auburn Hills once again. This time I was resolved to go inside. I waited outside for about five minutes but then just threw the door open and kind of like jumping out of an airplane for the first time I went inside. There were lots of people waiting there to greet me as I walked inside and they made me feel quite welcome right away, something I wasn't used to in the dead Catholic church. As I made my way to my seat and the pastor came up to the podium I couldn't find that lady radio minister anywhere. As I looked around wondering why she wasn't appearing or coming on stage the minister made a signal and the music started. So off to the races we went.

"In reply Jesus declared, 'I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again.' (John 3:3).

My experience that first week at Five Point Community Church was quite typical of what I experienced at other non-Catholic churches in later months as I began a search for a church a bit closer to my home in "partyville," Royal Oak. There were friendly people at strategic places to greet those entering the church. A certain leeway was allowed first time visitors but after the second or

third visit someone would approach you with a welcome packet and you would receive a personal letter from the pastor. Beyond this you could expect a phone call or email from the pastor asking you to a meal or a coffee at Starbucks. From there you would begin to meet more of the church community and even begin to minister to other newcomers such as yourself.

Frankly, years ago I thought that the first time I stepped into a Protestant church that God would strike me down. Far from it, the love and acceptance that I experienced even upon my very first visit to a Bible believing church exceeded that of all of the years I wasted away in the Catholic Church.

Here is a challenge for those caught in the cycle of frustration in the Catholic Church. First, pray a simple prayer to God: "God, reveal Yourself to me and show me the truth." Second, go to a Bible believing church for a Sunday service. If you can get someone to go with you that would be so much better. Third, send me an email through the Contact Us section on this web site. If you would prefer to discuss this by phone I am available once you fill out the initial contact request and leave me your number. I would be glad to pray with you, help you locate a church, or in provide whatever assistance that I can. Whatever you do, don't just keep going through the motions. And finally, tell others about what you have experienced. Post your testimony on this site and others dedicated to telling their story. Reach out and you will be surprised at the number of former Catholics you will find attending Bible teaching churches throughout the world.

May God bless your journey to find the truth.

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