

July 5, 2009 - SPECIAL FEATURE

## Deacon Evans's Conversion Story - "The Power of One Mass"

Dear SJN Parishioners,

I was asked and graciously agreed to share my conversion story with the parish. As we end the month of the Sacred Heart (June), begin the month of the Precious Blood (July), and begin the Year of the Priest, let's look at **the power of the Mass and the Eucharist and the Priesthood**. For it is there, *in Him*, that the power of His Life and His Love drew me to the fullness of the Truth and "home" to The Church.

I was born to a Catholic mother and a Southern Baptist father. I am one of 5 children. All of us were baptized Catholics as children and attended both Catholic & Baptist services each weekend until I was about 5 years old. (I have no memory of this.) For reasons challenging (as you can imagine) my parents made a decision to raise the family in one faith—Baptist (my mother gave in). We would be "allowed" to make our own decisions later. We lived in Puerto Rico, rich with 500 years of Spanish Catholic traditions—but my upbringing was at its core American and Protestant (fundamentalist)---schools on an American military base, American friends, an all day Baptist mission every Sunday and Wednesday, mission weekends, youth activities, home bible study, and family "altar time."

I was taught to love the Bible, to allow Jesus to guide and mold me personally, and of course to be "born again" and choose him as my personal Lord and Savior. It seems incredible, but with the exception of one wedding that I can recall, I never saw a Mass, entered a Catholic Church to pray, or even thought of my own "dormant" Catholic heritage---even though my mom was a secretary to 2 Chaplains, both protestant and Catholic on the base where we went to school. At 12, my family moved to Orlando, Florida where we were part of large mega-church with a vibrant youth program. Two of my brothers and I were involved in ecumenical movements including the "Jesus Movement" which came to Fla. from California, and the growing Charismatic movement which held a weekly praise night for youth/college students called *The Rock House* attended by thousands each month. There I met Catholics who were "growing in the Spirit"—and I heard of the "Eucharist" and why "it" separated us from Catholics in theology and worship. Many graces and friendships blessed my life during this time in my teens, and into early college.

At age 20, I finally "saw" my first Mass. The liturgy was forgettable—no music, bad acoustics, etc. The church was modern, unattractive. But when the liturgy of the Eucharist began, I heard every word and watched the priest's every move. He said all the "secret" prayers clearly, I knew their references from scripture and the Passover. When the priest chanted *Through Him, With Him and In Him* I broke out into chills. His

geneflections also made me shiver—**why** is he kneeling to the bread and wine? At Communion, my friend did not get in line to receive. I asked him why, and he said "I can't receive HIM today, I am overdue for confession; I will receive HIM next week hopefully." He said HIM---twice. Puzzled, I broke out into a sweat. I stared at the priests hands giving Communion. "That is *Him*? If that is Him that means I have never had Him..." I was confused, and hungry for Him from that moment on. The Eucharist was "waking up" my baptism to find its completion...in Him. That day, I will never forget it—that one mass, was the beginning of a long, beautiful journey to the Eucharist and to my home in Catholic Church---which I was already "part of." I would visit Catholic churches for years, watch people pray in front of "the box," spend hours in Catholic bookstores reading missals and prayer books trying to understand what I had misunderstood or not understood at all—*why are they praying to "that box," why do they need a Pope, Mary was really ever-Virgin, the saints are involved in our daily lives, confessing to a man in a booth?*

After a year of my own searching I began to take formal instruction, mostly in secret as my family did not approve, and attended daily mass as much as possible. After waiting tables at night I often visited the Blessed Sacrament and would "demand answers." And I read every word published by Orlando's Bishop, Most Reverend Thomas Grady —*his DC connection is that he was rector of the Basilica of the Shrine of the Immaculate Conception at CUA for many years*. Two Jesuits and one diocesan priest took me to "see Jesus" in the sacrament and gave me personal instruction for almost seven years. It was the intimacy and openness of how one of them in particular prayed in front of the Blessed Sacrament that helped me understand best that Christ Himself, His Life, His Love was present in the Eucharist, always waiting for us.

I was confirmed in *the Basilica of St. Paul* by Bishop Norbert Dorsey, C.P. of Orlando in my mid 20s. I was ordained to the Diaconate in *the Year of St. Paul*. The priest who vested me was Fr. Robert Webster, STL, former secretary to Bishop Grady; that priest was also one of the priests who took me to see Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament.

**When was the last time you invited someone to the Mass?** When was the last time you invited a non-Catholic to come to Mass with you? Perhaps one of them could be a future convert, a future deacon, or please God, a future priest. It may take just the power of one mass.

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