

Sermon St Mary the Virgin, August 17, 2014

I became an Episcopalian when I was 23 years old. At the time I was a college student at S.I.U. in Carbondale, IL. It was quite a momentous decision to make, for I had been raised in a Roman Catholic household, baptized when 3 weeks old at St Agnes Church on Pershing Rd and Archer Avenue, Chicago. All my relatives on both sides were Roman Catholics for generations.

I attended four different parochial schools through the eighth grade. I guess my first distancing from the Catholic culture was when I decided to go to Gage Park public high school. Not that there was much difference among my classmates. I can only think of a few who may not have been Roman Catholics.

College was the first time I was away from family and living at home. But I continued to attend Mass faithfully at the parish church near my off-campus room or at the Newman Center on the edge of campus. There was a large Presbyterian Church just across the street from my house. I could hear the boisterous singing on Sunday morning but I was taught never to enter a Protestant church.

But in 1964 I moved in with some other students from the Music School who were from the suburbs of Chicago and some small towns and NOT Catholic.

There were many heated debates about religion and I defended my Catholicism. But then I met Jerry, an Episcopalian convert, who was a postulant for holy orders and headed to seminary after graduation. He introduced me to St Andrew's Church after much persuasion, debate, and reluctance on my part even to attend a service there.

I was very, very curious because of all the similarities he pointed out to me. They had Holy Communion every Sunday with lots of chanting and singing. Their pastor was also called Father and they had a Bishop heading their diocese in Springfield.

But the priest was MARRIED AND HAD SIX CHILDREN! That was shocking! After much coercing, I agree to attend a service which they also called THE MASS. I remember being awe struck of how beautiful the music and words were, the stimulating sermon and as I pointed out afterward, the smell of wine that permeated the church as they gave everyone a sip of the chalice.

I also was greeted warmly by the priest, several faculty members from the music school, including Marjorie Lawrence the Opera Workshop professor who had been a metropolitan Opera Star before being stricken with polio.

Boy O boy, could she still sing sitting in a wheelchair. Her voice soared over the rafters.

I soon began attending both St Andrew's and the Roman Catholic parish. I continued to play the organ for weekday services there and also sang in the Newman Chapel Choir. Then one day, the R. C. priest sent word for me to come to the sacristy after one of those early weekday masses. He said to me, "You have been attending the Episcopal Church, haven't you?" I sheepishly admitted it. He said, "I thought so, this morning you answered all the prayers with their Elizabethan English responses!" You know, things like, "And With Thy Spirit"; Ahmen instead of AAmen. I was more careful afterwards.

Eventually, through some very personal and pastoral experiences, I asked to be instructed and received into the Episcopal Church. The first response of Fr. Hillestad at St Andrew's was NO. He said I was already a Catholic and didn't need to be converted.

That was when I learned that what I wanted to do was become a more dedicated Christian as I had found in the Episcopalians at St. Andrew's and switch from being a Roman Catholic to an Anglo-Catholic.

There was little adjustment as far as I was concerned. I could live without the Pope's authority. I felt and believed I was making a deeper, more personal commitment to Christ Jesus and the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Faith of the Church. Fortunately for me, the Diocese of Springfield and Diocese of Chicago were committed to the high-church, Anglo-Catholic tradition I had fallen in love with through those wonderful people at St Andrew's.

I was received into the Episcopal Church and Anglican Communion by Bishop Chambers in the Fall of 1965. At first I kept it a secret from my family (along with other secrets a young man of 23 has). But then I had to come to live with my parents in Chicago during my semester of student teaching. I had found an Episcopal Church, The Atonement and was going there on Sunday, a 45 minute drive from home. The cat was out of the bag.

Turmoil, tears, condemnations, parental sense of betrayal and failure all had to be dealt with. Eventually peace returned at home. But I had an uncle who refused to talk to me for several years.

I tell all this because it's a chapter in my story in the journey of faith. Perhaps some of it connects to your faith journey and story. It also explains why I continue to

have devotion and give honor and respect to St Mary, the Blessed Virgin Mother.

Veneration of her has always been a regular part of my spiritual life and still is. I learned the Lord's Prayer, the Hail Mary and the Gloria Patri very early on and have never failed to turn to them whenever I pray and meditate.

Devotion to Mary and belief in the power of her intercession is a very ancient, old practice among Christians. The early Church Fathers mention the faithful turning to her for protection. Her pictures in the catacombs indicates a special place in the earliest believer.

In The Bible she has a everlasting role in the birth stories of the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. She appears at moments in Jesus' public ministry. She is at the foot of the cross (as noted in the rood above us), and was in the upper room with the disciples afterwards according to the Book of Acts of the Apostles.

In the Book of Common Prayer, feast days are set three times in the year: the Annunciation 3/25; the Purification 2/2; and St. Mary the Virgin, 8/15 commonly called the Assumption. The form for the prayers of the people 1 & 5 mention her intercession and the collect #8 as their ending prayer.

The Episcopal Church holds to the long tradition of the important place of Mary in the history of Salvation and the ongoing life of the Church and the faithful.

Mary's vocation in the First Century in this world was to bring Jesus to us. From her he became Emmanuel - God with us. His humanity came from her and His Divinity from God the Creator/Father. Her work continues, and so much of my love for Jesus and the Church and all of you has been enriched by devotion to her.

I hope that you will renew your inclusion of prayers to the Holy Mother in your personal and private prayer life. I will gladly share more about mine. There are many ways to practice our devotion to Mary and All the Saints as we grow ever closer to her Son, Our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.