A MORMON SCHOLAR’S JOURNEY TO CATHOLIC FAITH

by Richard Sherlock

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Early in the evening of May 28, 2010, I am attending Mass in the majestic Basilica di Sant’Apollinare next to the Pontificia Universit della Santa Croce in Rome. From Utah I have come as a scholar to deliver a paper at an international conference on the work of the great Catholic philosopher Dietrich von Hildebrand, and I have come as a tourist to see the Eternal City for the first time. Mass is being celebrated in the basilica for those attending the conference.

I am not Catholic—in fact, I was raised a Mormon, though I have had serious doubts about the Latter-day Saint faith for decades. Yet my journey of the heart—which ultimately ended in the Catholic Church—came long after I had intellectually departed so I cannot receive Holy Communion. But when Archbishop Raymond Burke places his hand on my head in a blessing, the extraordinary presence of Jesus Christ moves my soul to tears. I now know, in my head and in my heart, that I have come to Rome as a pilgrim. I have finally heard his voice, and I will not turn away.

Of course, I was awestruck by the beauty of Rome. The conference was wonderful, and I made important contacts and great friends. But infinitely more important, I
found a priceless gift: the God of truth I had ignored for decades. I found my soul, which had been lost in the fog of my pride and stubbornness. Thus began a journey that took me to the waters of Catholic baptism, the anointing of confirmation, and first Communion at the Easter Vigil of 2012. You do not need to travel thousands of miles to have a real encounter with Christ. But your soul does need to be open in a way mine had not been for years.

Mormon friends ask how I could leave the LDS Church. Catholic friends ask why the pilgrimage to Rome took me so long. My brother, a rabbi, was the first person I told I was converting. When we talked, he said simply, “You were a Catholic thinker when you were a graduate student at Harvard in the 1970s.”

Intellectually, there are two beliefs at the core of the LDS faith that I eventually realized I could not accept. The first is the doctrine of a “great apostasy” afflicting the church. Mormons do not deny that Peter led the church after Jesus’ Ascension. They deny that the Holy Spirit continued to guide it. Mormons believe that after Peter the patristic church lost its way.

And by “losing its way,” Mormons do not mean that the church suffered from human sinfulness or became too wedded to secular power. Christianity supposedly strayed so far that it was no longer Christianity. It did not merely require renewal, as St. Francis preached. It did not merely require a new vocabulary to express timeless truths, as Vatican II proclaimed. Mormons believe that the church”Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant visions alike”completely died and that Christianity required a “restoration” by God himself.

My intellectual journey was inspired in large part by my study of patristics. Reading the Church Fathers in my first year at Harvard in 1970“71, I realized that this story was false. Even my meager study of the Fathers allowed me to see what Newman had
seen” that there was a development of Christian thought, a deepening of our understanding of such truths as the Incarnation and the Trinity. There simply was no evidence of a fundamental break from the church Jesus established. As one of Mormonism’s most brilliant minds of the last half century, Edwin Firmage, wrote after he left the LDS Church: “The idea that God was sort of snoozing until 1820 now seems to me absurd.”

Two passages from the Gospel of Matthew are particularly difficult to reconcile with the Mormon doctrine of the great apostasy. Jesus promised Peter that “the gates of the netherworld” would not prevail against the Church (Matthew 16) and he promised the Apostles that he would be with the Church until the end of the age (Matthew 28).

The other fundamental Mormon teaching that I cannot accept is the absence of an existential distinction between God and man. In an 1844 sermon, Joseph Smith made a claim that profoundly shapes the way Mormons see the world: “God himself was once as we are now and is an exalted man.” Parse this out and God himself becomes a finite, physical being. How, I wondered, can we have absolute confidence in a God whose power and knowledge are limited, not just by the rules of logic, as St. Thomas would have said, but by unknown barriers? A limited God cannot be our anchor in the face of extreme horrors or profound personal loss. In the face of terrible, inexplicable loss, Job did not place his trust in an “exalted man.” The God who spoke to Job did not start out on a world like ours. This God, who comforted Job and comforts millions of others every day, to whom we can truly pray “not my will but yours be done,” cannot be the limited being Mormons call “god.”

The Mormon “god,” who came from a world like ours, cannot be the creator of all worlds, as Scripture and reason tell us he is. The physical god of the Mormons cannot have been present at creation, when there was no matter. Furthermore, if all of us can become “gods,” then Mormonism is incompatible with Christian Trinitarianism and
Jewish monotheism. It is polytheism.

Compounding all this, in my experience, is the fact that Mormons generally do not seek for serious answers. In fact, Mormon authorities actively discourage the marriage of faith and reason that we Catholics celebrate. I now profess openly what I always too silently believed: If a faith cannot be sustained in the face of serious questions, it is not a faith worth having.

If these reasons to reject Mormonism were sound for me over forty years ago, why did I stay? I could say it was culture, friendship, or inertia, and those reasons are accurate in a certain sense. But the full truth is found in Psalm 95: “Today if you hear His voice, harden not your heart.” I now know that at least four times in those forty years I specifically heard God calling me to his Church, but I turned away. My oldest and closest friend since 1970 told me twice directly that, like him, I should be a Catholic. I knew he was right. Yet I did nothing.

In one instance, the turning was literal. I had invited a Catholic theologian to speak at Utah State on religion and science, and I arranged a lunch for him with the Newman Club. After lunch, the parish priest and I talked for a long time. As our conversation wound down, I felt strongly that I should go with him to his office and talk about my faith. Yet I turned away and walked back to my office.

In the past two years, my journey towards the Catholic Church has brought me to a deeper relationship with Jesus Christ than I have ever had. I have not “given up my faith.” Leaving Mormonism for Catholicism is a journey many others are making, and it has allowed me to experience God’s love in a profoundly richer way.

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