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A family's conversion story

Tom Roberts | Jan. 9, 2009

?Never in a million years? could Kristi Jean Casteel have imagined that she would one day move from her nondenominational Protestant evangelical roots to the Roman Catholic church.

As he tells it, the odds weren?t much better for her husband, Rick.

But the couple, pulled along in the wake of the struggle and search that their son, Joshua, had gone through, eventually found themselves moving in the same direction, though sometimes for quite different reasons.

No one-size-fits-all conversion template exists. Hearts and minds turn for reasons as varied as the race itself. But the Casteels must hold some place of distinction in the annals of such journeys. Perhaps as only converts can, they view the church with a seamlessness that might elude those of us who carry the baggage of the Catholic culture wars and who have camped out for a time at one or another of the points on the liberal-to-conservative spectrum. So they speak of the influence of some of the ultraconservative offerings of Mother Angelica?s Eternal Word Television Network in the same breath, and with equal ease, as they do of the strong connection they felt with the writings of liberal thinkers Henri Nouwen and Thomas Merton. Thérèse of Lisieux is as important in their understanding of the faith as Dorothy Day. The thinking of John Paul II and Benedict XVI contribute as much to their understanding of the church?s social-justice and antiwar stands as to their understanding of the church?s positions on abortion, sexuality and liturgy. In a phrase, they buy it all, and if they?ve got reservations about a point here or there, those are reservations easily held.

?He definitely had an effect on us,? said Kristi of son Joshua during an interview last summer in Iowa City. ?I take it back to the philosophical discussions we had when he was in high school. Some of the questions he had and some of the problems he had in the Protestant evangelical realm? presaged his later and deeper explorations.

When he joined the Anglo-Catholic church in California, his mother said to herself, ?That?s good. God is doing something different, but what?s important is his relationship with God, so that?s OK.? But they continued to have ?a lot of spirited discussions? about theology and liturgy versus a more relation-based approach to religion and a more ?me and Jesus kind of idea,? she said.

At the same time, Joshua?s father was also looking into aspects of his son?s pilgrimage. When the younger Casteel was confirmed, his father attended the ceremony and a retreat aimed at discerning whether Joshua had a vocation in the Anglo-Catholic church. Rick, as his father is known, became enamored of the Book of Common Prayer and committed to doing the daily office while his son was in Iraq. Rick couldn?t find an Anglo-Catholic congregation in his area of the Midwest, so he was advised to seek out a Roman Catholic church. He did, and he began attending parish-based classes for those inquiring about Catholicism.

That exploration and the continuing discussion with his son conducted via e-mail from Iraq led him to radical reassessments of his positions on militarism and war. Among the most profound influences on his decision to convert, however, were the writings of John Paul II on sexuality, particularly his theology of the body.

The elder Casteel and his wife are family counselors, and he deals a great amount of the time with men experiencing sexual difficulties.

What he found in John Paul II and other Catholic teaching, he said, were three major points:

First, sex is a desire, not a need. ?All the Protestant circles, whether it?s from James Dobson or someone else,? he said, ?are always talking about how to help men deal with their sexual needs. And I was always saying it is not a need. A lot of guys stay single. They?re not going to die without it.?

Second, it?s not a right, it?s a gift. ?What do you do with the sexual urge as a man? You make it subservient to love. It?s not something you can demand, but if you claim that word, that it?s a need, then by golly you can demand it.?

Third, sex is a relationship and not a technique, not an activity. ?It?s not something you do because the malls are closed on Saturday night.?

The combination of his introduction to liturgy, traditional prayer and the writings of John Paul II and others along with his wife?s reading of church history and the lives of saints and a sudden, unexplainable desire to attend a Catholic service with her husband pushed them both beyond any remaining resistance.

?Once we went,? said Kristi, ?it was all over. I went and I never stopped going.?

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