

[A Calvinist Anglican Converts to Orthodoxy](#)

[Source](#)

by Dn Joseph Gleason

A recent interview with Dn Joseph regarding his conversion to the Orthodox Christian Faith with Mark Bradshaw, from [Conversations On Orthodoxy](#).

Here is a transcript of the interview:

Mark Bradshaw: Welcome to another Conversation on Orthodoxy.

Deacon Joseph Gleason: I think that when you go into an Orthodox church, and you open your eyes to see the robes, to hear the chanting, the Psalms, the incense, the prayers, the presence of God there in the midst of His people, it's like you're reading the book of Revelation and you're seeing how worship happens in heaven.

Mark: That was the voice of Deacon Joseph Gleason, at Christ the King Orthodox Church in Omaha, Illinois, describing his first visit to an Orthodox church, observing the Orthodox liturgy for the first time, the awe he felt, the feelings. I recently became acquainted with Deacon Joseph and his story, which is quite an amazing one, because he's a convert, but he didn't just convert to Orthodoxy alone. He brought his family, his cousin, and in fact his entire church with him. Quite the amazing story. I asked Joseph to sit down and talk about his early life, how he got to the point where he was starting to question things. How this journey went. Unfortunately, the audio was a little bit bad at the first, so if you will forgive me, I'm going to retell the story for him, for at least the first part, until I can have a little bit better audio.

So, Joseph Gleason was the son of a piano player [Whitey Gleason]. He was a part of a very famous gospel group called the Blackwood Brothers [and also the Jubilee Quartet], traveled around for a while, and so did Joseph—the entire family. It was nomadic Christianity. It was every week in a different church. This sort of Christian lifestyle continued for their entire family until Joseph was about nine or ten, when his parents settled down in Texas, and they began to attend church a little more frequently, but they still changed churches every couple of years until somewhere in his twenties—early twenties—Joseph decided to stop that and put down some of his own roots in a single church—a church there that was basically a Baptist church [*McKinney Bible Church is a Calvinistic church that does not practice infant baptism*], and he became a staunch Calvinist. [Joseph was] very, very enthralled by the thinking and the system of Calvinism seemed to answer a lot of his questions.

He went to Westminster Seminary [now called Redeemer Seminary], and began to think about full-time ministry, and then he...I guess he read too much. He says he read too much Bible; he read too

much history. And he started to get some strange theological ideas, things that weren't particularly Baptist or Calvinist, but that, from his increased learning of history and seeing how the early church practiced Christianity, he started to see that there may be some things that he needed to reconsider.

He came to the conclusion that in fact infant baptism was the standard practice of the early Church. [He] came to understand the theological validity of it, the reasons why it was done, and he went and got his kids baptized by a local Presbyterian minister, so he got lots of odd looks from that, for sure, but it didn't stop there. It was a lot of other things.

The more he read in history, the more he decided, "*Things don't quite look like what we're doing here.*" He was still firmly convinced about Calvinism, absolutely, but wanted something that was more liturgical, more sacramental, and so he eventually became Anglican [CANAN]. He was Anglican for a certain amount of time, went to Anglican, and then he and his family made a move, to Illinois.

There were some family reasons that he wanted to be in Illinois, so he took his family and one of his cousins moved with them as well, and they went to Omaha, Illinois—a very small town in Illinois—to be with some family that were there. When they got there, they decided that this place didn't have an Anglican church, the nearest Anglican church was quite a distance away. They decided in conjunction with an Anglican bishop, that they would look at starting an Anglican church in Omaha, Illinois, and so they purchased an old Presbyterian church building that wasn't in use, and they began to—after some amount of time—they began to have services there, to whatever extent they were capable. They were themselves still learning what it meant to be Anglican and how you can do services, and so you know there was definitely a period of time where they were learning, but they had a small core group of people there, and they worked to get their "Anglicanism" solid, before they started launching out to convert all Omaha to the Anglican faith.

Things seemed to be going pretty good. Joseph was ordained as a deacon—an Anglican deacon—on his way to priesthood, and then... and then the wheels fell off, you might say.

Another big transition came for him when he had a very good friend of his who was also a very staunch Calvinist who had become Anglican, as well. So, very similar path, and he contacted Joseph and said, "*Joseph, I'm gonna switch to the ACA.*" The ACA is a group of Anglican churches that had petitioned the Pope to become Catholic. The Roman church has made a mechanism whereby Anglican churches can come over into Catholicism *en masse*. The priests come over as-is, they still stay married, and just the whole church comes as-is. And this friend, who was an Anglican priest, said, "*I'm going. I'm gonna become Catholic.*"

And this appalled Joseph. He couldn't understand why this person who he respected, why he would possibly think that this was a good idea, or right. And so he began to raise all the objections, the standard objections, "*what about this,*" "*what about that,*" and for the first time, Joseph said he had

somebody who could actually answer the objections. Prior to this, you talk about these things maybe with your friends, but it's usually with people who believe like you. You rarely actually talk about certain core foundational Christian beliefs with people who disagree with you, and who are very knowledgeable and can answer objections, and can really make you think. And this is what happened. He began to think, and this is where we can let Joseph take over the story.

Deacon Joseph Gleason: He himself [Fr. Chori] was converting. He was previously a Reformed, Calvinistic, Presbyterian guy. He became a Reformed Calvinistic Anglican, just like me. And at the time, I was the editor of *The North American Anglican*. That's a theological journal, which publishes various articles by priests, deacons, and laymen, by the continuing Anglicans who have separated from the Episcopal church. And anyway,, so I was in frequent contact with him as he was writing for my journal, and he also assisted with some of the editing for the journal. And then, lo and behold, I find out that he is swimming the Tiber, he's going to Rome.—And to fast forward, just as an aside, earlier this year, .—But at the time this was a great shock, because he and I both were coming [from a background of] Calvinism, we had close ties to Presbyterianism, [and] even as Anglicans, we still considered ourselves Protestants. And then here he was, wanting to get under the Pope. And I was floored by this.

I was floored by the idea of . That was one of the big, big problems that I had. I was aghast at the idea of giving up . I mean, to be honest, at the time, my head was just spinning. You know, here's this—in retrospect, you try to make everything logical and methodical, and this happened and this happened, but the truth of it is, at the time, your head's spinning, you're emailing back and forth, you're asking other friends for their help, you're chatting with your family, you're chatting with your wife, you're praying, you're reading and getting sleepy, and then getting away from it because you've got to prepare a sermon for the next Sunday, and then you've got a diaper to go change, and just kind of a whirlwind, really, and you know, frustrating, because, you know, up until that point, the issue had come up from time to time, but usually it was straw men. I was dealing with other Protestants who already believed in sola scriptura, and were just looking for justification of it, or I was dealing with Catholics who did not believe in sola scriptura, but they didn't really have any good reasons why not, and they weren't very good apologists for their position. But here I hit up against somebody who was a friend of mine, who I respected, who I trusted, and he was also very intelligent, very well-read, and he asked me some questions that I simply could not answer. I just remember, you know, being confronted with a number of arguments that I simply couldn't answer.

Right about this same time, I had been studying the canon of scripture, and even as an Anglican, , because I'd done enough historical studies and textual studies to be very tempted to believe that , and that the book of Tobit was inspired scripture, and these other books that you find in the Catholic and the Orthodox Bibles.

And so one of the popular arguments against sola scriptura is, "*Okay, well, the doctrine of the canon of scripture: where is that in the Bible? Where does the Bible say there are 66 books in the Bible? Where do the scriptures tell you that the book of Baruch is not inspired, but that the book of Esther is inspired?*"

You know, there are nine books in the Old Testament—at least nine books, and maybe more—that are never quoted anywhere in the New Testament. And a lot of those are—actually, those nine, if I remember right, those are all in the Protestant Bible, so if you add the deuterocanon, that would be you know, fifteen or twenty—but just in the Protestant Bible, you have like Obadiah, you have the Song of Solomon, you have Ecclesiastes, you have multiple Old Testament books that are never once quoted in the New Testament, so you can't even use that as your guide.

And then of course the New Testament itself: there's nowhere in the Bible that tells us that 2nd Peter is or is not scripture, or that Revelation is or is not scripture. So, I think one of the big ones for me is that I finally realized that *even Protestants do not believe in sola scriptura*. Now, they say they do, and yet when you ask them, "*Okay, how do you know for sure that these are the 66 books in scripture, how do you know for sure what is scripture and what is not?*", they never can give you a proof from scripture. They always have to fall back onto their Protestant *tradition*. And so at the end of the day, I realized I was not pitting tradition against scripture; I was pitting Protestant tradition against a much more ancient, Orthodox tradition. And once I realized it in those terms, you know, it made it easy to know which side to choose.

Mark Bradshaw: Now, at this point, Joseph has left the safe comfort of Protestantism, and has entered a dark night of the soul. Many converts will recognize this sort of phase, where everything is slightly topsy-turvy. You're not quite sure where things will land. And for some there's a temptation to stop, to go back, close your eyes; it's just too uncomfortable, and that's understandable. For others, they push forward. Some people want to take their time, and that's not an unreasonable thing, to stop, take stock, let things work out. And in fact, that's what some of Joseph's friends counseled him to do. They said, "*Take your time. Think about it. Don't make any rash moves.*" But Joseph kept moving, and I asked him, "*What was it that motivated you to keep pressing forward, and not let things settle down?*"

Deacon Joseph: In fact, the primary motivator was my children. Whatever happened to the church, whether I was ever a pastor again or not, I wanted my children—and I still do want my children—to go to heaven, to know Christ, to follow Him, and to be in the same Church that He Himself founded. And you know I had friends of mine saying, "*Well, you can think about what you're thinking about, and study what you're studying, but just slow down, man.*"

I had a friend of mine, , and he said, "*Look, it's nothing to spend five years or ten years just slowly and carefully thinking these things through.*" And if I'd been a single man, or if I was an older man with grown children, I might have agreed with him. But when I looked at the ages of my children—I have seven kids, and now they range in age from two to nine—but when I was thinking about my children, I realized, "*I don't have ten years to figure this out.*" If I had waited ten years to figure things out, most of my kids would already be old enough that my influence on them would have been limited.

So, I felt constrained by love for my children to do whatever it took to pray, to read, to spend hours a day just plowing through this material, just to seek the truth. Because whatever the truth was, whether it was Orthodoxy, Catholicism, Protestantism, anything, whatever the truth is, whatever it means to know Christ, I wanted my children to grow up with that, and that was the only thing I really cared about at that time. Let the chips fall where they may.

Mark: So with some determination, Joseph pressed on. He knew that sola scriptura was untenable, so he couldn't be a Protestant. That was no longer an option for him. He was left really with two choices: Roman Catholicism or Eastern Orthodoxy, and I know from having seen some of Joseph's early correspondence, that he spent quite a time looking at Roman Catholicism and had pushed quite far down the path to mentally adjusting to the idea of becoming Roman Catholic. There was a lot there to admire, a rich history, apostolic succession, Episcopal governance of the church, the saints, infant baptism.

But there were a few things that he couldn't quite satisfy himself on. was something he had come to believe was definitely a historic practice of the Church. The Roman Catholic Church no longer did that.

But much more importantly, the central issue that divides the Roman Catholic Church from the Eastern Orthodox Church: that of the role of the papacy, the bishop of Rome. Where does Rome fit in all this? And really that is the quintessential issue in deciding between the Roman Catholic Church and the Eastern Orthodox Church. If you can determine whether the Roman Catholic idea of the role of the bishop of Rome, in the life of the Church, whether that is true, then so many of the other questions fall right into place. If it's not true, the same thing happens, but in a very different direction.

Deacon Joseph: Yeah, I read all these different Roman Catholic apologists, and I read these different Orthodox apologists, but for me, the tipping point finally came when I read this book by Michael Whelton, and the title of the book is ". And that was just immensely helpful, because one place that Orthodoxy and Catholicism agree is on the authority of the . And one of the things I loved about this book *Popes and Patriarchs* is that it very closely scrutinized the way that the Pope of Rome was looked at through the eyes of the Ecumenical councils. And he certainly is looked at as

somebody with great authority. I would even say that he is looked at as first among equals. At what I believe is the Council of Chalcedon, after going over Pope Leo's tome, that they literally marched around and cried out that ". So he certainly was honored, he certainly was revered, he certainly was venerated, and yet, he certainly was not looked at as a bishop of all bishops. He was not looked at as someone with universal jurisdiction.

Just for example, when you consider that he [the pope] , when you consider that at the , before they marched around praising Pope Leo, they actually spent several days , to see whether it had any heresy in it. You know, not something you'd really expect today. I mean, can you imagine if they had the "Vatican III council," and Pope Benedict was there, and he brought his writings, and everybody just spent weeks poring over his writings to see whether it was really Catholic or not? That's kind of hard to imagine.

And then you can look at the fifth council - Second Council of Constantinople, there was a period there where Pope Vigilius was actually, you know, kind of obstinate in regard to certain doctrines, and , and based on modern Roman Catholic theology, I don't think that's really possible.

So it was just really helpful, looking at this book and going back through the councils, and the history of the papacy, and understanding that yes, the church of the first millennium did hold the bishop of Rome in very high regard, but he did not have the same level of authority that modern Roman Catholics [believe he has].

So, long story short, I read this book. It was the final tipping point, helping me to decide for Orthodoxy instead of Roman Catholicism, and so, here's this grand journey, and I'd gone through all these Protestant denominations. I had spent time at a Bible church. I had attended Westminster Seminary. I had spent some time with an Anglican seminary. I had become ordained as an Anglican, I had finally realized that I need to take that final step and join the ancient Church, and after months of study, and thousands of pages of reading, and prayers, finally became convinced that the ancient Church is not Rome, but the ancient Church is the Orthodox Church.

And at this point in my journey, it finally became apparent that I probably should visit an Orthodox church.

So, you know, kind of an unusual journey, I think. Not exactly how I would recommend for anybody else, now that I've had an opportunity to really experience the glories of the liturgy. But I had no clue about the glories of the liturgy at the time. I just knew that I was searching for the ancient Church, and I found it in books. I read and read, and the thing was, when I grew up, there weren't any Orthodox churches around. And even when I finally found the Orthodox Church in books, the nearest Orthodox church at the time was an hour and fifteen minutes one way to this little town of eleven hundred people. So, it really wasn't even on my radar for years, and then when it was on my

radar, it was a pretty decent drive. And it wasn't that easy just to go visit churches at the time, because here I was by this time pastoring a church, so I was preparing sermons to preach every Sunday, so we had to reach a pretty good level of confidence about it, before I felt good about telling my whole congregation, *"Okay, this next Sunday, I'm not going to preach. We're going to all go drive an hour and visit the Orthodox Church."*

Mark: Now, at this point in the story, we need to back up, because there's someone that we haven't talked about. The conversion process is difficult even if you're single, but Joseph wasn't single, as you've heard him mention, he is married, and has quite a few children, and his wife was unfortunately along for the ride. When you are married to someone who is going through this sort of process, where their world is getting turned upside down, that means that your world is getting turned upside down, too. So I asked Joseph how his wife had dealt with the transition.

Deacon Joseph: Well, this was a pretty tumultuous several months that I was transitioning from being a solid, hard-core Calvinistic Anglican Protestant pastor, to being thoroughly confused, not knowing which way was up, to finally deciding that Catholicism or Orthodoxy had to be true – at that point in time I was neither one – and then finally becoming Orthodox. During this whole time, you know, she's very nervous, because we had spent a good deal of our lives believing that if you rejected sola scriptura, if you rejected justification by faith alone, and you know, just some of these Protestant catch phrases, that you were denying the faith and you were anathema. And there were many congregations that we had been part of earlier in our lives where you figured that all Catholics were hiding horns. And the Orthodox, we didn't know what they were hiding because we didn't know they existed. So my wife was very nervous about it, and frankly, so was I.

I even remember one point I asked her to get on the phone, and call from Texas, the Calvinistic Baptist guy, just to get his advice, because I told her, I said, *"I really, really think I'm doing the right thing, and I really hope I'm doing the right thing, but if I'm doing the wrong thing, I don't want to take you to hell."* So I literally asked her to get on the phone, and just to get a second opinion. Talk to our old pastor and discuss things with him, you know, get any input that she could. And also, I made it very clear that I did not want her to just convert to Catholicism or Orthodoxy – whichever way that I went – I did not want her to convert just because I was. I wanted her to, in her own time, read some of the books that I was reading, work through some of the questions that I was working through, ask her own questions, do her own research, because I knew that this was a really, really big deal.

This was not just, *"Okay, are we going to be Nazarene or Wesleyan?"* This was not even, *"Are we going to be Baptist or Presbyterian, or Anglican?"* This was, you know, literally crossing over from one team to another. You know, we had been Protestants our entire lives, and now, we were saying, *"Yeah, the scriptures are inspired by God, but so is holy church tradition. Yes, we believe that we should pray to God, but we also need to be asking the saints to pray for us."*

So, this was a big deal. I recognized that, and even though I made everybody very uncomfortable with the speed at which I was plowing through books and asking questions, and challenging, I still tried to give everybody enough space to do things at their own pace. So, pretty much, I guess to use the cliché, I dragged everybody kicking and screaming. I went forward; I pulled them behind in my wake. But simultaneously I told them, *"Now, don't come just because I'm coming."* So, you know, she would read these books. She would ask questions. She would think about it, and she came on-board fairly quickly. I'd say she wasn't too far behind me.

It took a little bit longer for some of the people in our church, like , for example. I love the story that he tells, and this actually was slightly before our journey into Orthodoxy. We had been looking at some different doctrines. We had been looking at the canon of scripture, and some things that in retrospect I can see God used to lead us toward Orthodoxy. But at the time, I didn't realize that. And anyway, I found out after the fact that Jeremy and his wife Christa had been sitting out, having a discussion, and were just talking about how things were going with the church, and the fact that they had moved across the country to help get the church plant going, and to assist with things, and now that there were these different doctrines that we were looking at, and different books of the Bible that we were looking at, and just how much changed since they had been Presbyterian and Nazarene before that.

And then his wife Christa, she said, *"Well, at least we're never gonna be praying to Mary."* And Jeremy, said, *"Well, never say never."* And she got big saucer eyes, and she looked at him and she said, *"What do you mean by that?"* And he said, *"I'm not saying I want to pray to Mary. I don't,"* he said, *"but a lot of the things that we're doing now, like baptizing babies and paedocommunion and wearing robes and having candles,"* he said, *"there's a lot of things we're doing now that we never thought we'd do, so wherever God leads, let's just go where He leads."* And in retrospect, that's funny, because here we are Orthodox now, and all of us have icons of Mary up in our houses.

And then, with other people in the church, I just made it very clear. *"When I'm preaching from the pulpit, I am going to preach what I believe is true. But just because I say I believe it's true, that doesn't require you to immediately agree with me."* I encouraged them to read on their own. I encouraged them to ask anybody that they wanted to ask, and if they saw anywhere that they felt that I was wrong, I invited them to challenge me on it. Then I did not get upset about the challenges. I did not get upset about the discussions. I welcomed those, because, honestly, I was still in a state of flux at the time, and I knew there was the chance that I was doing the wrong thing, and if that's the case, I wanted them to correct me. So I think that helped. They knew that I was not just requiring everybody to salute and say, "Yes, sir," and just come on-board immediately. Things were moving along at a quick pace. It was uncomfortable for everybody. But I did give them enough space to ask questions, to study on their own, to disagree with me, to challenge different things. And even though

I know a lot of times it does not work out this way, I am very thankful that in this particular case, everybody stayed on-board. We didn't lose anybody.

You know, here's this grand journey, and I had gone through all these Protestant denominations, I had spent time at a Bible church, I had attended Westminster Seminary, I had spent some time with an Anglican seminary. I had become ordained as an Anglican, I had finally realized that I need to take that final step and join the ancient Church, and after months of study and thousands of pages of reading and prayers, finally became convinced that the ancient Church is not Rome, but the ancient Church is the Orthodox Church. And at this point in my journey, it finally became apparent that I probably should visit an Orthodox Church.

It was fantastic. I remember our first divine liturgy. I watched this whole thing. I was enamored by it, and bewildered, and confused, all at the same time. I didn't know what all exactly was going on, but I liked what I saw. And after it was all over, the priest, Father Nick came over to the fellowship hall, and he asked me, he said, "*Well, what did you think?*" And I said, "*That looked to me like worship in the book of Revelation.*" And that's still what I tell people today.