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From a Baptist boy to a Catholic priest

Father John Putnam shares his conversion to Catholicism

by KATIE MOORE
staff writer

Editor's note: This is the third in a series of conversion stories.

CHARLOTTE — He was raised Southern Baptist in western North Carolina, now he's a priest serving in the Diocese of Charlotte.

As a child, Father John Putnam went to church sporadically with his family.

His father was born in the North Carolina mountains and raised at the Baptist orphanage in Thomasville. His mother was raised Methodist but began attending the Baptist church with his father after they married.

"I didn't even know what a Catholic was until I was in sixth grade," said Father Putnam. His first real exposure to Catholicism occurred in 1978 — "the year of the three popes."

During that year, "there was a great deal of 'Catholic' coverage because of the deaths of Paul VI and John Paul I and the election of John Paul II," said Father Putnam.

"I remember being almost mesmerized by everything I was seeing," he said.

A spiritual quest

"When I was in high school I began a spiritual quest," he said; a journey which led him to the Catholic Church.

"For some time there had been something missing inside me," said Father Putnam, who began visiting different churches with friends.

During that time, "I remembered my attraction to things Catholic," he said.

He wrote a letter to the pastor of St. Aloysius Church in Hickory. That letter was lost in the mail; after not getting a response he wrote again.

"With the second letter I received a response and the pastor, Msgr. Eugene Livelsberger, invited me to come see him at St. Aloysius," said Father Putnam.

He "was the first priest that I had ever met."

At Msgr. Livelsberger's request, he attended Mass for the first time. It was there that he felt a profound sense of belonging.

"Everything inside me said this is where you are supposed to be," said Father Putnam.

Looking back on that experience he attributes that feeling to the presence of the Lord in the Blessed Sacrament.

“The Catholic liturgy was very foreign to me since the Baptist worship service is so simple; yet, there was something that attracted me a great deal,” said Father Putnam, who soon began meeting with Msgr. Livelsberger for individual instruction in the faith.

His parents were not initially pleased with his decision to become Catholic.

“They had many misconceptions about Catholics,” he said, but it was a human experience that eventually won them over.

“During the course of that time, my parents had a crisis in their lives and no one to talk to,” said Father Putnam.

When he suggested that they meet with Msgr. Livelsberger, they reluctantly agreed.

“He was the only person who would take time to talk to them,” Father Putnam said.

After that, “they began to develop a very different view of Catholics and the church,” he said.

Father Putnam’s parents were present when he was baptized in the Catholic Church on his 16th birthday in 1981.

“They have been supportive ever since,” he said.

A deeper calling

“My parents always wanted me to pursue medicine,” said Father Putnam, who studied pre-medicine and biology at Lenoir-Rhyne College in Hickory.

“The priesthood was always on my mind,” he said, and “by sophomore year it became more and more pressing.”

At that time, he began looking into the possibility of becoming a priest. During his senior year of college, he began the formal application process.

Remarkably, his parents were peaceful with his decision.

“When I decided to pursue the priesthood, my mother said that she really was not that surprised,” he said.

One thing about Catholicism that Baptists tend to be skeptical about is the devotion to Mary. But that wasn’t an issue for Father Putnam, who said he has always had a natural comfort level with Our Lady.

“The rosary and devotion to her was very natural,” he said, “very comforting.”

In fact, Father Putnam credits Mary with his vocation.

After his first year of seminary he struggled with his call to the priesthood. That summer, he went on a pilgrimage to Fatima, Portugal, where Mary appeared over a six-month period starting May 13, 1917, to three shepherd children. After that, he felt at peace about continuing his formation.

Today Father Putnam serves as pastor of Sacred Heart Church in Salisbury, where he has been since July 2000. He is also vicar forane of the Salisbury Vicariate and judicial vicar for the Diocese of Charlotte.

He said his conversion has helped him in his ministry as a priest, particularly when it comes to working with participants in the Right of Christian Initiation for Adults (RCIA). It is also helpful when he is working on cases for the diocesan marriage tribunal, especially when dealing with Catholics wishing to marry non-Catholics.

“It’s helpful to understand where they are coming from,” said Father Putnam. Being a convert allows him to “talk their language,” he said.

But even to this day, Father Putnam is an oddity in his family. My extended family still “doesn’t know what to make of me,” he joked.

But through it all, he has never looked back.

He feels confident in his decision to convert and become a priest.

“I’m convinced that it’s what God wanted,” he said.

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