

# Growing up with "Papa" vs. Going to the Father through the Son

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## A Conversation with Jeff Dionise

In reading some of Martin Luther's writing recently, I came away with the distinct impression that Luther talked like the Bishop of Rome was always in the room with him. While not thinking much about church until I came to faith at seventeen, my Protestant heritage couldn't quite make sense of the seeming ubiquity of the Pope in Luther's writing. And I wondered, "Is that something that modern Catholics still experience?"

So, I asked one of our elders, Jeff Dionise, about that and what he shared gave me—someone who has never been a part of the Catholic Church—incredible insight what it might 'feel' like growing up Catholic. And more than that Jeff shared a testimony of his own 'Protestant Reformation,' where he left the Catholic Church to find in Christ mercy and grace in his hour of need.

Here's a transcript of that conversation.

*DS: Jeff, can you tell me about your experience in the Catholic Church? From the outside looking in, it seems like the Pope is an ever-present figure. Is that still true today?*

JD: Growing up a devout Catholic, the Pope was a constant, invisible presence in my life—just short of omnipresence.

I understood the way God worked in my life came through what was revealed to the Pope. He was the only one with a direct-line to God. The Bishops and Priests were responsible for communicating that information to me as needed. I never remember questioning any of this. The Pope's authoritative word seemed to be understood by "the faithful" as the ultimate truth that everything is based on.

For that reason, I didn't see a compelling reason to read the Bible. I actually felt sorry for non-Catholics who didn't have the Pope, which forced them to scramble around in vain trying to figure things out on their own. I could just relax and if there was something I needed to know, it would make its way down to me from Rome. Even if I became interested in a Bible story from time to time, it was just a passing curiosity. It wouldn't make sense to try to apply it to my life because I would probably just end up messing it up.

I never thought of the Pope as just a man in charge of the church. He was somewhere between Earth and Heaven and was the only one that could truly hear and see spiritual revelation from God. In that way, he was the only real and tangible mediator. The most consistent and important guidance that seemed to come down from the Pope was to trust Mary. We should ask her to plead our case to Christ because the Pope can't be everywhere at

once like she can. In times of real trouble, the best way to get heavenly help would be to say as many rosaries as possible.

Another thing I was often encouraged to do was to offer up pain as a sacrifice. I remember one time feeling lucky I had a dentist appointment because I could offer the pain as a sacrifice for something I felt guilty about.

In my experience, the Pope was the helper Jesus left in His place. We never really thought or talked about the Holy Spirit much. We just knew the Holy Spirit was part of the trinity and was probably used to do miracles and stuff like that.

I believe the key reason the Pope seemed to “always be in the room” was that at any moment you knew something new could be coming down directly from Heaven to him. I remember hoping something would be announced to make things easier. Such as making it acceptable to eat meat on Fridays during lent, or maybe we would find out we no longer had to fast for an hour before communion.

I would tremble at the thought of meeting the Pope. It seemed he would be able to see right through me and instantly know all of my sins in detail. I also understood him as having the power to get me into Heaven, or send me to Hell.

Most of what I believed growing up was consistent Catholic dogma. Some of it was based on exaggerated tradition and stories handed down from one generation to the next. Most Italian families, like mine, had their own take on a few things, but it all seems pretty similar. The thing that really captured it for me happened a few years back in Baltimore at an Italian deli in “Little Italy.” I noticed that behind the counter there were three little pictures taped to the wall: The Pope, Mary, and Frank Sinatra (the real Italian trinity).

*DS: As I hear your testimony, Jeff, it helps me to understand a lot more about you, the Catholic Church, and why Luther and modern devotees are so fixated with the Pope. It is striking to me the way in which the Pope stands in the place of Jesus Christ. Whereas Jesus, seated at God's right hand lives to intercede for us and is present with us through his Spirit, it seems as though the Pope actually replaces the sweetness of knowing the presence of Christ. Is that how you would describe it? When you came left the Catholic Church, what did you discover about Jesus Christ, the true high priest?*

JD: The exciting thing about being called out of Catholicism is discovering the simplicity of the Gospel. As Paul warned in 2 Corinthians 11:3, “the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness” and he continues to try to lead astray God's people from “the simplicity and purity of devotion to Christ.”

The complexities of Catholicism can be mind-boggling. Deciding who to pray to can be a challenge to say the least. The saints have specialized power to help with certain problems, there is extra power in praying to the “Holy family” (baby Jesus, Mary and Joseph), your guardian angel shouldn't be ignored, and there are always the safe and sure prayers to Mary (or the rosary if you want to get serious). Consequently, these saints crowd the believer's prayer closet, making prayer to the Father through the Son difficult.

There are also many rituals that must be considered. For just a few dollars, a candle can be lit at church for an extra effective prayer, a vial of “holy water” can be brought home to keep your house safe, a “holy medal” of a Patron Saint can be worn around your neck for

protection, and the “Brown Scapular” guarantees you will not suffer the fires of Hell if worn at the time of death.

I could go on, but the point is that all of these traditions are replaced by one thing—the person and work of Jesus Christ.

When I was in a very dark place, Jesus himself showed up and revealed to me the utter emptiness and sin of these traditions. For me it was like a flash. He filled me with an overwhelming understanding of how complete we are in him and how evil it is to look for refuge in anything or anyone else. He is everything and we are nothing. It’s all about Him. The exuberant feeling of being freed from the chains of hundreds of years of tradition, therefore, is difficult to put into my own words. Thankfully, God has given me his.

Colossians 2:9 says, “For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily,” indicating the presence of God that we have in Christ. Likewise, Hebrews 10:19–22 beckons us to come to God in Christ, because of the work he accomplished on the cross.

<sup>19</sup> *Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus,* <sup>20</sup> *by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh,* <sup>21</sup> *and since we have a great priest over the house of God,* <sup>22</sup> *let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.*

Leaving the Catholic Church, it suddenly became clear what the curtain ripping in two really meant (see Matthew 27:51). We have access! We no longer need an earthly priest to gain access for us. Jesus made a way for us once and for all. He is our great high priest (Hebrews 4:14–16). And he has even made us priests to one another (1 Peter 2:9). All this is mind-blowing for a Catholic!

As a result of seeing the centrality of Christ, the Bible came alive during this time. I felt like understanding and knowledge was literally being poured into me. I could not get enough of the Word and wanted it to wash over me 24/7. I realized that to know the Bible is to know Christ. Not only does every word in the Bible point to Jesus Christ, but everything—the ink, the paper, the air we breathe, every molecule in the universe—it all leads back to Him.

*DS: Jeff, I praise God for the gift of illumination he’s given you to see Christ and the Word of God so clearly. It impresses upon my heart how wonderful it is to have a great high priest in Jesus, who not only communes with us by his Spirit, but who is God. And I grieve more fully for those in the Catholic Church who may adore Vicar of Christ, one of the Pope’s many titles, but who could in a greater way know and be known by the true priest Jesus Christ.*

*As you think about your experience, what might you say to someone teetering on the edge of the Catholic Church?*

JD: When all of these events transpired, I decided to no longer attend mass. But I also had to decide what church I would go to. At this time, the Lord gave me total peace and assurance he would handle that. In short time, he led us to Occoquan Bible Church and I immediately knew I was with family. Being around the saints was like rubbing salve on a burn. I couldn’t get over the joy I experienced just standing among the body of Christ. As Ephesians 1:23 says, “the church is his body” and at OBC I began to experience Christ through his people.

At the same time, I had to learn that the Pope is not the helper Jesus promised. The Holy Spirit is alive and well and revealed to me that our hope is not found in a man, even if that man (and *his* church) claims to be the "Vicar of Christ." To those teetering on the edge of the Catholic Church, I would encourage them to read Scripture for themselves and prayerfully consider the words of Isaiah 2:22: "Stop trusting man, who has but a breath in his nostrils. Why hold him in esteem?"

All that being said, for anyone leaving a church that offers an imitation priest, there is going to be a season of grief. Personally, along with extreme gratitude for where the Lord had taken me, I went through a period of substantial regret and sadness for the years I did not walk with the Lord. I felt like I wanted to be locked in a room for all eternity so I could bitterly weep forever over the time wasted. Yet, Christ in his infinite mercy replaced those feelings with zeal and an intense urge to labor for Him. He taught me through His Word that time does not trip him up. He invented time. It is a substance he can use in any way he pleases for his own glory. And thus, I took comfort in the power of Christ to make all things new (2 Corinthians 5:17; Revelation 21:5). Thus, I would encourage others to trust God that in his economy there are no wasted years, but only seasons of life that prepare us to know God through his Son.

Finally, I'd add how gracious God was to my family. In this season of life, he also opened the eyes of my wife and children. My oldest brother had left the Catholic Church years earlier and was a great encouragement to me. I was sure the other Catholic members of my family would join me in fleeing from Catholicism after hearing what happened to me. I quickly learned it doesn't always work like that. Saying I was no longer Catholic was like saying I decided not to be Italian anymore. I would have to rest in God's timing with the understanding of this undeniable fact: Italians and Catholicism go together like sausage and peppers.

In the end, however, the sacrifices to leave the Catholic Church were worth everything and more that I have found in Christ.

*DS: Jeff, thank you for sharing what God has done in your life. It helps me to better understand the way Catholics relate to the Pope, the Church, and the Bible. And more it makes me long for more people to follow your path—a path well-traveled from the days of Martin Luther until now—where earnest Catholics might find their love for God's high priest to be realized in Christ and not the Pope.*

*Indeed, this is why our Lord came, to provide a final sacrifice for our sin and to secure a way of access to the Father through his better and eternal priesthood.*

*Praise God for Christ, our great high priest, who truly is "in the room" as his Spirit continues to lead Christians to the Father, through his priestly mediation. On that gracious reality, may we give him thanks and lead others to trust only him.*