

a Young Adults

Canadian finds home in the Catholic Church

Story by Rob Cullivan

NORTH CHILI — Paul Symington, a 25-year-old Canadian citizen, said that for most of his life he considered the Catholic Church not really what Christ imagined his community of believers should become.

"I basically thought that the Catholic Church was a very corrupt institution, that the apple had fallen far from the tree," Symington said during an interview in his apartment. Symington is a native of Samia, Ontario, three hours southwest of Toronto.

Raised to focus exclusively on Jesus in his Christian belief, Symington said he believed the Catholic Church had saddled Christianity with a Marian cult, as well as unnecessarily incorporating the veneration of saints, relics and icons. So this February, Symington decided to do something about his feelings toward this "corrupt institution" — he joined it.

What led him to change his mind about Catholicism was a change in his view of it. For example, he said, he used to think Catholics worshipped Mary. Then he learned that they actually venerated her. To show how far he's changed in his thinking, he now prays the rosary, the most Marian of prayers.

"I see in the rosary an inherent focus on the life of Christ," he said of the prayer, which uses scripturally based mysteries to highlight important events in



Andrea Dixon/Staff photographer

the lives of Jesus and Mary.

Baptized an Anglican whose family became Free Methodists in his teens, Symington has been in the Rochester area since 1995 when he began attending Roberts Wesleyan University, a liberal arts college. After obtaining a bachelor's degree in philosophy and religion, he pursued graduate studies at Northeastern Seminary, which is located at Roberts, and this year obtained a

master's degree in theology.

Married to a Wesleyan music major, he is looking to obtain a doctorate in philosophy down the road, and is looking at several schools throughout the country, he said. He and his wife plan to stay in the area until she completes her studies next year.

Symington became interested in Catholicism through his readings of such church fathers as Thomas Aquinas, he said. He added that at Northeastern, many of his class discussions included spirited exchanges on why the Christian church split into Catholic and Protestant camps. He also had many informal discussions about the Catholic faith with David Higbee, director of religious education at St. Thomas the Apostle Church, Irondequoit. Higbee and Symington met through some mutual acquaintances at Roberts Wesleyan, and the two have become friends over the years, bonded by their common interests in philosophy and theology, Higbee said.

"He's a reflective and thoughtful individual," Higbee said in a phone interview. "We just hit it off."

Higbee said Symington found in Catholicism "a philosophical realism" expressed by such things as the sacraments, physical expressions of the divine. In fact, Symington said his master's thesis focused on the interplay between physicality and spirituality. He noted that the Catholic teaching that Christ is truly present in the Eucharist

had come to appeal to him because it encompassed both the divine and the physical.

"Catholics have the concept that Jesus is still with us in spirit and in body," he said. "We can live that on a day-to-day basis."

Symington added that in his religious search, he also realized he valued unity among Christians, and that the Catholic Church was a powerful symbol of that unity.

"I think that there needs to be an integrity in the church so that it can function properly, so that it can be a power in the world," he said.

He noted that in his generation, kids grew up suffering from the ill effects of disunity both in society and at home where many young people his age saw their parents get divorced.

"We've seen so much unproductive disunity," he said. "I see disunity kind of running the day now. ... The last thing (my generation) needs is a disunified church."

That being said, Symington stressed that the fact that the church has eventually incorporated opinions and people it once shunned is a sign that Catholicism is flexible enough to encompass many views. For example, he said, Joan of Arc, condemned for heresy in her time, eventually was canonized a saint.

In February, Symington joined the church with Higbee as his sponsor. Symington is now a member of St. Mark's Parish in Greece. The new Catholic has already put his faith into action, serving as a paid intern with Catholic Family Center's Department of Social Policy and Research this summer.

As part of his duties, Symington worked with religious communities to forge a coalition in support of the "Living Wage Ordinance" for Monroe County, similar to one passed by the Rochester City Council in January. Living wage supporters are asking the county legislature to pass a bill that would require businesses entering into service contracts with the county to pay their workers a wage adequate to support a family of four's food, clothing, shelter, day care, transportation and medical needs.

Symington completed his AFL-CIO-funded internship Aug. 15, and is planning to continue working on the campaign as a volunteer. He sees the living wage movement as one firmly grounded in Catholic social teaching and scriptural calls for employers to treat their laborers justly.

"The Catholic Church was very ahead of its time in its support of workers, the poor, workers' unions," he said, referring to various church social teachings developed in the 19th and 20th centuries.

He added that in his research he found that contractors that had paid living wages experienced lower employee turnover, more employee loyalty, higher productivity and decreased employee training costs. Unlike Marxists, Catholics stress that workers and employers should work together to benefit one another, he said, not against each other.

As for the future, Symington said he may consider ministry in the church, or may become a teacher. Whatever his future, Higbee said he believed Symington made the right choice in becoming Catholic.

"As I watched him admitted to the church, I had the sense that 'Here's a fellow who's really coming home.'"

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