Crossing into the Church: Profiles from RCIA

WRITTEN BY MARJORIE CAMPBELL


Like many alumni of the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA), the process by which prospective converts and unconfirmed adult Catholics fully enter the Church, Harper has a distinct “before” and “after” story – her life before she joined the Church and her life after coming into full communion with the Catholic Church. Wedged between the two, RCIA candidates often experience the catechetical instruction and shared reflection as a time of life-changing transition.

Take parishioner Tim Pursell.

“RCIA brought us into the fold of the Catholic Church. We asked each other, ‘Who are the lepers in modern society?’ It’s not a ‘they’ – it was an ‘us.’ Our sense of being outcast was replaced with finding a home in the Church.”

Pursell should know.

Losing his partner and his job, gripped by addiction, Pursell hit rock bottom. He found himself homeless, isolated and without hope. He was in death’s grip. Pursell believes his friend (and now fellow parishioner) Ben Bongers saved him.

“Ben reached out to me,” Pursell says. “He was a cradle Catholic. Even though I had joined the Episcopal Church in 1992, I had always been drawn to Catholicism. Ben urged me to try. He gave me a bottle of water when I was parched and dying in the desert.”

Harper Brooks’ “before” story, too, is dark and dangerous.

“I was always clairvoyant and psychic,” Brooks, now 56, recalls. “My mother was a Christian minister but an abusive person. So as a teenager, I was drawn toward witchcraft, starting with Tarot cards and moving into Wicca. I practiced as a witch for 30 years.”

By the time of her accident in 2009, Brooks was feeling unsatisfied and anxious, uncertain what her legacy in life would be.

Brooks was coming to a conclusion – that the Devil cannot cast out himself and that Wicca, also known as Pagan Witchcraft, had led her to see the worst in people.

When Tim Pursell first entered the church at St. Dominic’s, he was homeless and in treatment 6 blocks from the church. “St. Dominic’s got me sober,” he explains. “The church connected me to people who were not criminals and not drug addicts. I became very interested in the liturgy. Attending Mass helped break...
Two Dominican brothers, Br. Chris Brannan OP and Br. Dennis Keln OP, will be ordained as priests on May 28th at 10 am at St. Dominic’s - all are welcome. Please meet the future priests!

Brother Chris Brannan, OP

**Grew up:** Clovis, near Fresno.

**College and major:** B.S. in Computer Science from California Poly San Luis Obispo. MA in Theology from Franciscan University of Steubenville, OH.

**Favorite Food:** Anything that has been wrapped in bacon (except Brussels sprouts).

**Hobbies/interests:** Frisbee golf; tinkering with Linux/android software; making and drinking cold-brew coffee.

**Interesting fact:** I am really good at ping-pong, and used to be good at solving Rubik’s cubes. My personal best record is slightly over 1 minute.

**Before becoming a Dominican:** I was a software developer, then as a college teacher of basic math and computer applications, then web developer.

**Attracted by:** The pursuit of veritas, truth, by means of study, combined with a common life of prayer, ordered toward preaching and explaining the Gospel.

**Favorite saint:** Ignatius of Antioch

**Looking forward to:** Being able to help people grow closer to God and the Church through the sacraments, especially confession and the Eucharist.

Brother Dennis Keln, OP

**Grew up:** We moved around a bit, then settled in Mobile, AL.

**College and major:** B.S. in Mechanical Engineering from the U.S. Naval Academy.

**Favorite Food:** I like too many different styles of cuisine to have a favorite!

**Hobbies/interests:** Running, hiking, snorkeling and windsurfing. Running often turns into prayer.

**Interesting fact:** I enjoy studying and writing about the mutually beneficial way science and theology can interact in a way which respects the autonomy of both disciplines.

**Before becoming a Dominican:** I was a Naval officer on a submarine based out of Pearl Harbor. I spent five years in Europe studying. I also did missionary work in Mexico.

**Attracted by:** The strong commitment to community life, and the apostolate of study, preaching and teaching.

**Favorite saint:** Mother Theresa, Therese de Lisieux, John of the Cross.

**Looking forward to:** Giving in-depth retreats where preaching and the sacrament of reconciliation can help lead people deeper into the mystery of the Eucharist.
the addiction cycle. And people noticed me, like Sister Colleen. They helped me get back on my feet.”

Pursell’s daily life began to take a new, more hopeful tone. When he finished his treatment program, he went to every Mass St. Dominic’s offered.

“I loved them all,” Pursell, now 48, recalls. “The parish is so rich and dynamic. At 9:30 a.m. there are kids screaming while at 7:30 a.m. there is such focus. Spanish Mass is so joyful and the 5:30 Sunday Mass has a beautiful Our Father.”

Pursell can go on and on – about the liturgies, the ministries, and the quality of music he has come to love at St. Dominic’s. These have all filled his desperate void and given him hope, creating what he calls “the Springtime” of his life. He participates in every aspect of Church life, and even broke his wrist taking down Christmas trees on the altar.

“I’ve been changed,” Pursell concludes. “I am part of something bigger. There are Catholics all over the place. It’s like a mafia of love and kindness.”

When Brooks awoke after being struck on her bicycle, she began a search for a Christian church, a search that landed her at St. Dominic’s. “I told God I’d give Him 100 churches. At the first one, I encountered racism. So then I called churches and left messages. One church returned my call. Scott Moyer from St. Dominic’s.”

Brooks found herself attracted to Catholicism, a religion “of choice, not force.”

“This is the life God wanted me to have,” Brooks believes. “If you aren’t doing dishonest things, you have nothing to worry about. Everything I was ever promised, I have received.”

Brooks, too, is a changed person.

“I get validated every single day from Jesus Christ. I get up because God needs me to spread and teach gospel. No matter what the Devil throws at you, God has your back. He has always been this way but I did not recognize it.”

For both Pursell and Brooks, RCIA opened a bridge from dark lives, with no hope and no growth, to lives steeped in the holy presence of Jesus Christ through the Church.

Important to both of these amazing RCIA alumni is that they did not have to cross that bridge alone. The priests, nuns and parishioners of St. Dominic’s walked beside them, listening and witnessing the charity which both Pursell and Brooks identify as critical to their conversion process.

Both Pursell and Brooks have sponsored RCIA candidates and participated in RCIA classes. Both perceive futures deeply intertwined with and nurtured by the Church. Pursell is currently completing his paperwork to join the Prison Ministry and looks forward to traveling to Lourdes as a malade this month. Brooks hopes to become a certified RCIA instructor.

From lives of despair and darkness, these RCIA alumni live now in light, truth and community, giving to others what they say was given to them. And their former lives, what becomes of such a past?

As Brooks puts it, “All my former Wicca associates say I’ve gone crazy. I don’t have much contact. It’s not in the nature of good to compromise with evil. I’m now in the hands of the Holy Spirit and see the best in people, not the worst.”

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Meet Lima Center client, Richard Day
BY DOMINIQUE KIM

“When I come here, I find my place or serenity.”

Sure enough, when Richard Day starts reflecting on the Lima Center, what it means to him and how it has transformed his life, his eyes light up and you witness a steady clarity and even a peace. “Whatever goes on outside of here, I find myself spiritually equipped to go out. I would not be the happy person that I am if not for the encouragement and love from Sister Colleen (Sr. Colleen McDermott, O.P.). The Lima Center is a place where an individual can find his way back into society.”

Born in Oakland, Richard has faced some tough times and his face darkens as he thinks back… While he started coming to the Lima Center nearly 20 months ago for food, laundry and other nourishing services the staff graciously provide to those in need, he found himself wanting to get involved and help out at the Church. “Sherri just gave me a green light. She gave me a responsibility that I thought would never come back to me. I love what I do for this Church.”

Richard started helping out working with the St. Dominic’s Garden Committee on the beautification of the Church, and over the 15 months has become a lead on restoring and designing the gardens surrounding St. Dominic’s Church. His aspiration is to make sure the beautification extends all the way around the Church, and is focusing on the portion on Bush Street between Steinert and Pierce Streets, with the help of “Bruno” who supplies the plants and without whom he attributes the work couldn’t happen at all.

Richard Day’s love of St. Dominic’s shines through as he muses that this Church (St. Dominic’s) is worthy of the beatification. “I’m truly glad that they allow me to be a part of it. When I saw how beautiful it is on the interior, I thought, why not have it look like that on the outside too?” Ultimately he says, we are doing all this to please God.

He has also helped in other ways. During the El Nino Months in late 2015, the Lima Center Emergency Shelter provided overnight shelter to nearly 35 Lima Center guests with no home during the El Nino rains after Fr. Michael Hurley, the Friars and St. Dominic’s Staff approved the opening of the Aquinas and Sienna Rooms space for this purpose.

Richard was the main leader from the Lima Center who volunteered each night we were open and made sure that the Aquinas and Sienna Rooms were left cleaner than found. Other Lima Center guests and 50 parish volunteers also served as helpers throughout the weeks of the storms, coming to the Lima Center in the evenings for check-in, dinner, showers/laundry, movies and overnight accommodations in the Aquinas and Sienna rooms.

The contributions Richard has made to the Church are rooted in a deep love of St. Dominic’s coupled with gratitude for the Lima Center staff and community of friends he has made there. It is the only resource center of its kind, since it’s the only one I’ve ever come across where the staff ask, and ask often, “What is it that we can do for you?”

His love and contributions to St. Dominic’s and the Lima Center isn’t simply a way of “giving back” but something that affords him a strong sense of meaning and a new lease on life. The benefits extend beyond his contributions at the Lima Center, to his new-found family too. “Everything is a first,” he reflected with awe and tears filling his eyes,” describing the first Thanksgiving and Christmas he spent with his daughter, son and 3 grandchildren last year.

Listening to Richard Day, you can’t help but feel like God is pleased.