

The Long and Winding Road

From Cultic to Catholic

A Memoir by Deacon Mark Komula

SAMPLE CHAPTER

Chapter Thirty-nine: Take It To The Limit

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The RCIA class was winding down as we passed through Lent. The readings at Mass and the subjects of the class seemed deeper. Some of it I could follow. A lot of it I didn't. So, I read more. Reflections. Meditations. Spiritual books.

Rita suggested I read Scott Hahn's book, *Rome Sweet Home*. I resisted. Who was Scott Hahn? When I found out he had been a Presbyterian pastor and theology scholar, I was skeptical. I found a YouTube video where he and another biblical scholar were having a discussion. I watched...for about five minutes. Dr. Hahn sounded too much like what I had come out of. I didn't want that.

I came across another apologist while on YouTube. Patrick Madrid. A cradle Catholic. He had a radio show. I watched his video for a few minutes. He had a completely different style. People asked questions. Hard questions. About the Blessed Virgin. About the need for confession. About the pope. His answers were conversational, like he was talking to a friend, riding in the car or over a cup of coffee. I noticed the difference.

I was still waiting for something to convince me one way or the other. It hadn't happened.

Could I profess faith in the Catholic Church? I wasn't sure.

Others in the class were talking about how in some parishes the converts were received into the Church at the Easter Vigil. What was that? I didn't know.

Monsignor described Holy Week. This was different. I wanted to know more. Palm Sunday of the Passion of the Lord. I missed that last year. What I heard surprised me. The assembly participated. How did that work? He showed me the Missalette. Oh, it's going to be much longer.

Monsignor talked about the Chrism Mass. What was that? I didn't know. The Priests of the diocese went to the Cathedral. They renewed their vows. Why? The Bishop blessed the oils. I remember hearing about the oils. I didn't remember this part.

Thursday of the Lord's Supper. Foot washing. Really? I wanted to see that. Better get there early, he advised, that is if you wanted to get a seat.

Friday of the Passion of the Lord. Good Friday. I held services on Good Friday. I thought it would be the same thing here. It wasn't. Another Mass where the assembly would participate. Then venerate the cross. What did that mean? I didn't know.

Sacred Triduum. That was a new word for me. Catholics had their jargon too.

The Chrism Mass was held on Monday of Holy Week. I read that it was normally held on Holy Thursday. I asked Monsignor about it.

Simple answer. The diocese was too large geographically for all the Priests to get back in time for the Holy Thursday Mass and procession.

What procession? He explained it. Interesting.

He said the school would send a couple of buses of students to the Chrism Mass. They did that every year. Someone would be designated to bring the oils back to our parish.

I checked my calendar. I was busy Monday of Holy Week. I couldn't change it. I wanted to go. It sounded like a District Service. But something told me this would be different.

Holy Thursday came. Janis and I were there, early. The front rows were reserved. More people than we expected. School kids all in uniforms. Teachers giving instructions. Fr. O'Neill was up front in the sanctuary getting the incense ready. He didn't use it very often. As soon as he brought it out from the sacristy, people started coughing.

Then he lit the charcoal. I smiled.

The choir began practicing something. Interesting melody. It sounded chant-like, but there were instruments too. This was different. I liked it.

The school students started filling in the front rows. Teachers shepherding them to the right row. The littlest were in the front. Some of the older students were holding gladioli. What was this? I didn't know.

The Mass began with the Cantor announcing the processional hymn. The music started. I watched the altar boy carrying the cross. His pace was slow, steady. Two more carrying candles. Then one with incense. Swinging it slowly. Little puffs of smoke came out. The scent was familiar, but I couldn't name it. I liked it. More servers followed.

When they got to the altar, the server handed off the incense to the Deacon. He held it while the Priest added more incense. A lot more smoke now. The Priest walked around it pausing as he incensed the altar. Then he went to the big candle up front. Bowed and incensed it. Then the cross. The whole time everyone was singing. He handed the incense back to a server who took it into the sacristy. I watched the smoke rise towards the ceiling.

The music stopped and the Mass began. Like Sundays. But not quite.

Father began the Mass. Until the Gospel.

The cantor began the Gospel acclamation, as the Deacon stood before Father for a blessing. He walked to the Ambo.

"The Lord be with you."

“And with your spirit.”

“A Reading from the Holy Gospel according to John”

“Praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ.”

Then a server appeared next to the Deacon and handed him the incense. The Deacon incensed the book. He handed it back to the server.

As the Deacon proclaimed the Gospel, the server swung the incense. Thick smoke this time. Rising slowly. You could barely see the Deacon.

The aroma filled the church. This was really different.

The Deacon finished reading. And went back to his place at the chair. The server disappeared unnoticed.

Father gave a homily. When it ended, the music started. Ushers appeared bringing folding chairs. They were set in a row across the front.

People came forward and sat down. Each of them removed a shoe and sock. Father removed his outer robe. A pitcher, bowl and towel were brought to him. He went from person to person, washing their foot. Slowly. Intentionally.

The choir sang, *“I give you a new commandment, that you love one another.”*

Interesting.

The foot washing ended. So did the music.

The prayer of the faithful.

Preparation of gifts. Like always. But not quite.

The servers were getting more incense ready.

Father incensed the gifts and the altar.

Then the Deacon.

The Deacon incensed Father, then Monsignor.

Then he motioned for the people to stand.

He bowed, then incensed the assembly.

Communion went on. Like always.

The prayer after communion. And the final blessing.

A student walked to the front carrying a banner. Flute music started. The Priest put on another garment. He went to the Tabernacle and took out a large gold vessel. He stood in front of the altar facing the assembly perfectly still.

The flute notes were clear, but haunting. The choir started singing. In Latin. A piano took over the melody. Slow. Soft. The voices harmonizing perfectly. Beautiful. But I couldn't understand Latin.

The banner led the procession. The cross followed. Then the school students. The older girls cradled the gladioli like babies. The servers followed. Candles. One swinging incense. Then the Deacon. And finally, the Priest holding the golden vessel with his hands tucked into the cape.

The procession moved slowly down the center aisle in time with the music. The verses were sung by two cantors. One male voice, the other female. The chorus by a four-part choir.

"Blessed are we, blessed to be called, called to the supper of the Lord."

Chant-like but with accompaniment from the flute and piano. I started humming the bass line. I watched the people in front of me make the sign of the cross as Father passed. We made it too.

The procession continued to the back aisle. Father stopped. The Deacon took the incense, bowed and incensed the gold vessel. Then they all continued. Across the back and up the left side aisle. Pausing for more incense.

Across the front aisle. Down the right. Across the back. Finally, up the center aisle towards the altar. That music playing all the while. I was locked in on that bass line.

The students went back to their seats.

Except the girls with gladioli. They formed two lines. One on each side of the aisle. Raised the flowers like swords, the tips touching together as the Deacon and Father passed under them. Father went to the Tabernacle on the left side altar. He carefully placed the gold vessel in front of it with its doors wide open.

The cantor sang in a beautiful soprano voice.

"Blest are we, blessed to be called, called to keep vigil with the Lord."

They genuflected and the music faded into silence.

Everyone knelt.

The Priest and Deacon went to the altar in silence. Removed everything and took it to the sacristy. A quiet voice said that adoration would continue until 10:00 PM, please leave in silence.

Ushers came in with buckets and sponges and removed the Holy Water from the fonts by each door.

That's when I noticed that the crucifix behind the altar was draped in red. The statues of the Holy Family were draped as well. I didn't know why.

Afterward, I asked Janis if she had noticed that.

She looked at me funny and said, "They were covered on Palm Sunday. You didn't notice that?"

I had not. I could not imagine how I missed that.