

OUR SUNDAY VISITOR

FOR CATHOLICS WHO LOVE THEIR FAITH

Seeing the Light

Political columnist Robert Novak made the journey from Jew to Catholic through experiences in Washington

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Syndicated political columnist Robert Novak has told many stories over the years, revealing the behind-the-scenes power jockeying in Washington, D.C.

But, perhaps the most interesting story he can tell is of his becoming a Catholic, which culminated in his baptism, first holy Communion and confirmation on May 20, 1998, in Washington's oldest Catholic church, St. Patrick's.

He gives the fullest account to date of his conversion in his new book, "The Prince of Darkness: 50 Years Reporting in Washington" (Crown, \$29.95). In it, he subtly introduces the building blocks of his conversion, leading to a well-crafted exposition titled "Conversion." The reader discovers how this "saturnine" Jewish boy from Joliet, Ill., ended up embracing "Christ, the Light of the World."

This chapter opens with scenes from the year leading up to his conversion with Washington drama, including President Bill Clinton's attendance at the Gridiron Dinner in March 1998 -- exactly two months after word of the president's affair with Monica Lewinsky came out.

As then-president of The Gridiron Club, a prestigious organization for Washington's media, Novak shared the dais with the president.

Later that evening he had his first bout of nausea, dizziness and fainting, followed by another bout eight months later. The cause was high blood pressure and cholesterol, which took their toll just as the Holy Spirit was starting to make a deeper impression on him.

Mystery of the Spirit

In an interview with Our Sunday Visitor, Novak emphasized the mystery of the Holy Spirit in his spiritual development. No other explanation suffices for this analyst of the news to feel drawn to the Catholic Church and how he, as a cradle Jew, could believe in the true presence of the Eucharist, which he calls a "gift" of the Holy Spirit.

Novak traces the beginning of his spiritual journey to when, as a 21-year-old Army Second Lieutenant, he read spy-turned- defector Whit-taker Chambers' autobiography "Witness." This "led me to think about my spiritual void."

Expecting to be sent into battle during Korean War, Novak began to pray to God, "for the first time, really, since I was 13 years old. ... to give me courage," he said. Chambers' treatise "divided the world into the people who were with God and against God," Novak explained. "And I didn't know where exactly I stood. I wasn't against God but was I very with God?"

As it turned out, the only combat he would witness firsthand was the spiritual combat that had begun in his own soul.

A fateful meeting

Fast-forward some 30 years, where, with 25 years of Washington reporting under his belt, he was smarting from a brush with death after contracting spinal meningitis. One night in 1982, Washington politico Jeff Bell, himself a Catholic convert, dined with Novak and brought along some Catholic books for his friend. "I didn't really take Jeff seriously," Novak told OSV. "I wasn't going to become a Catholic."

But then, some three years later, Bell introduced Novak to Opus Dei Father C. John McCloskey, co-author of the recently released "Good News, Bad News: Evangelization, Conversion and the Crisis of Faith" (Ignatius, \$12.95), telling him the priest was "a very interesting guy."

Novak's friendship with Father McCloskey blossomed into a more than two-decade relationship. Novak illumined how the Spirit tugged at him through the priest. "We'd talk politics. And, then it would kind of drift into the Church and theology," Novak said of the meetings.

"And I'm not as dumb as I look, I knew he was proselytizing me and he knew I knew. But, why did I keep seeing him? Well, that's Holy Spirit, in effect, because I still didn't have much intention to being Catholic."

Simultaneous to his meetings with Father McCloskey, Novak's wife, Geraldine, became an active pro-lifer and, sensing their spiritual thirst, sought out sympathetic faith communities. When the couple moved to downtown Washington in 1992, she began attending Mass at St. Patrick's.

"I started reading the Gospels, which being Jewish, I'd never read," he said. "And, Father McCloskey suggested that I try to read the whole New Testament, if possible. I never did that. But, I did really read the Gospels and the story of Christ."

Clarity comes

His faith, he said, has given him more clarity on the "great truths" Ezra Pound impelled him to write about early in his career.

"It's not that I'm suddenly writing different kinds of columns," he said. It's that the Church has put into perspective for him what is really important in life, such as the dignity of every human being. Prayer and the sacraments also helped him weather the national controversy over his revealing the name of CIA operative Valerie Plame.

Today, the columnist continues to anger, entertain, irritate and vindicate in his writing and during appearances on television news commentary programs. And all the while, behind the scenes, the Holy Spirit is working.

Robert Novak's Patron Saint

Robert Novak's Washington experience has impressed upon him the wisdom of Opus Dei founder, St. Josemaria Escriva, who wrote, "These world crises are crises of saints."

One man who embodied this point was St. Thomas More, whom Novak chose as his patron saint. He is a dramatic Catholic figure who, Novak said, "fits into my belief about the oppressiveness of government, and how tyrannical the forces of government are."

More was lord chancellor of England shortly before he was executed for refusing to take the Oath of Succession, which named King Henry VIII head of the Church of England. More gave up all of the power and influence he had in England -- not to mention his family -- "because he stood for the things that were opposed to government," Novak said.

He was also touched by the report that beneath the clothes and accoutrements that noted Mores' office as chancellor (which is equivalent to today's prime minister), the man wore a hair shirt.

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