



Following the Light:

A Poet's Journey Back to the Church

Kevin Bezner, a deacon in the Byzantine rite, based at St. Basil the Great Ukrainian Catholic Mission in Charlotte, has recently published his seventh collection of poetry, *Following the Light*.¹ The collection reveals a journey back to God, and a meditation on God's creation, forgiveness, and second chances.

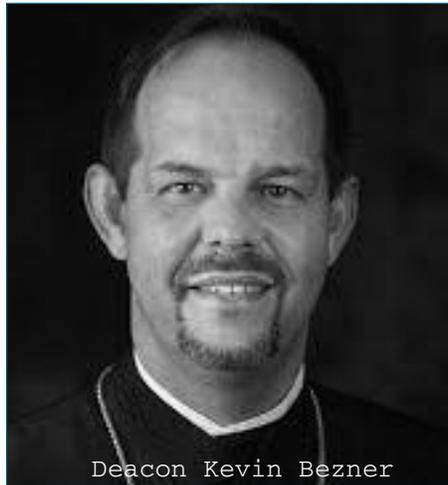
Bezner holds five academic degrees, including a doctorate in English from Ohio University and a master's in theology from Holy Apostles College and Seminary. When we met, Bezner had just returned from a pilgrimage to Poland and the Czech Republic. We sat on his back deck under the shade of pines and oaks. "I don't think there's any purer drink than tea", he said, pouring me a cup. "There's a very calming effect and it connects you to the earth. Like wine and bread."

Just in front of us, under a dogwood tree, was a statue of Mary and another of St. Francis of Assisi. These are statues that one may not have found in Bezner's yard years earlier. "I grew up Catholic", he told me. "But by 1979, at 26 years old, I came to see myself as an atheist. Rather than moving toward the light, I was moving toward the dark."

He remembers a call to the priesthood when he was younger.

"I was in the fifth or sixth grade and attending school at an orphanage that was run by the Sisters of Mercy. At the orphanage, we were called outsiders, because we didn't live in the orphanage. There weren't many of us. We were at the school because all the other schools in the city were full."

But it was at the Catholic school that he began slipping away from the Catholic faith.



Deacon Kevin Bezner

"The orphans were tough. I was naïve", he told me. "I had never heard of gangs before, but some of the orphans claimed to be members of gangs. I didn't know anything about pop music, but the orphans knew all the singers and the bands of the times and all the ways of life that pop songs of the times described. 'Leader of the Pack' was a song that resonated for them. While I gained much from my time at the school, I also was corrupted. By the time the Beatles hit and then the Stones, I had lost all sense of wanting to be a priest."

Bezner then went on to earn a bachelor's degree in American studies and played college baseball. His passion for baseball and his skill as a catcher in high school marked him as a prospective pro.

"I wanted to be a professional baseball player. One of the things I loved about baseball is being in the field under open skies. It's the purest of purest games. The game, at its purest, is connected to the natural world."

After obtaining his bachelor's degree, Bezner moved on and obtained a master's

degree in American studies. He began focusing on fiction writing. The poetry didn't come until later.

"I tried my hand at poetry in grad school, when I was 23, but it was awful." Instead, he focused on writing book reviews and fiction. "I really wanted to be a reviewer, critic, and interviewer. I interviewed Tim O'Brien, Kurt Vonnegut, Norman Mailer, John Barth. That became my school of writing."

Then, in his thirties, he began to focus on poetry. His first full-length collection of poetry, *The Tools of Ignorance*, was well-accepted, and included praise from the Beat poet Allen Ginsberg, who called it "visual lucidity".

Many of the poems in his latest volume of poetry, *Following the Light*, were written while he was away from the Catholic Church. I asked him how he feels about publishing poems that were written during his three decades away from the faith—a time of agnosticism and then atheism, Buddhist practices, and secular influences.

"The poems capture the purity of the moment", he said. "Even when we don't realize it, God is present in our lives. When I began looking over the poems, I realized that there was a theme of light. By then I had come to know what the light truly represented."

Bezner had been drawn into Buddhism through writers like Jack Kerouac and Gary Snyder. "Like many people were", he said. "But I couldn't call myself a true Buddhist. I was as much a Buddhist as the typical Catholic who doesn't embrace every aspect of Catholicism is a true Catholic." But Buddhism, he said, was leading him to the Catholic Church all along.

“Buddhism has a lot of good, but it doesn’t have God, it doesn’t have Jesus Christ. But it did teach me to live with silence and calm and peace. The calm and peace came from sitting and walking in peaceful settings, and watching birds. I always loved birds but I didn’t know anything about them. I’ve always loved nature, and that love of nature opened up the doors of Buddhism because of the emphasis on the moment. Buddhism gave me a sense of the universe.”

All of a sudden, the statue of St. Francis in Bezner’s garden took on new light. Bezner’s latest collection of poetry beautifully illustrates a deep connection between nature and spiritual healing, and echoes the words of Pope St. John Paul II: “Our very contact with nature has a deep restorative power; contemplation of its magnificence imparts peace and serenity.”

At one point, while he was still an atheist, Bezner came home late one night from work, turned on the television and began flipping through the channels.

“I got to EWTN. First I wanted to mock the Catholics I saw praying, attending Mass. ‘I’m an intellectual,’ I said. ‘Why should I believe this nonsense?’ Then I saw John Paul II praying and I thought, ‘Everything I’ve been seeking he seems to have.’”

This was not, however, an exact moment of conversion for Bezner. “We think of conversion as automatic, but things that occur to us prepare us for a journey. Some of us need a lot of time because we’re hard-headed.” Nonetheless, the memory of the chance encounter, via EWTN, with Pope St. John Paul II stuck with Bezner as he continued his life outside the Church.

Bezner held a number of jobs, including telephone operator, bindery worker, bookseller, administrative assistant, and researcher in the Washington office of a major corporation. He was a reporter for about four years and left to return to graduate school. He earned a second master’s, this one in English, did additional work toward an MFA in creative writing, taught at a community college, and then decided to pursue a doctorate in English rather than

an MFA. Doctorate in hand, he taught at various colleges and universities where God continued to be present in his life.

“I was asked to teach these great Catholic writers—Paul, Augustine, Dante. I called myself an atheist and yet I’m teaching these great Catholic writers and thinkers, and this begins to soften my heart. I’m living in great natural places: the beaches of Florida, the mountains of Montana, and the ridges and woods of Athens, Ohio. There was a focus on the natural world—and that’s Catholic. God is always with us; we’re not always with God.”

In 1993 Bezner left the natural beauty of Montana and moved to Charlotte. “When I left Montana I felt I was being expelled from Paradise.” He writes about this experience in a poem, “After My Father’s Death”: “we move toward mountains I see in the distance / and I tell my father how great they are. / He smiles and tells me ‘just wait.’”

“It was a dream about my father and mountains”, Bezner explained. “I’m thinking of my father and he tells me, in a dream, that the best is yet to come.”

In Charlotte, Bezner found that the best was, in fact, yet to come. Not long after his arrival he found himself teaching Dostoevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov*. He was especially drawn to the character Father Zosima, a holy monk and spiritual guide—a “*staretz*”.

“I had never encountered any character, any person like Father Zosima. Thomas Merton had become an interest, but for me what he taught did not compare to what I found in reading about Russian monks like Father Zosima. Because of this, I considered becoming Russian Orthodox. I felt, however, that if I returned to the Church I would have to be in union with Rome, because that is what I had promised God after my conversion experience in 1998 in the mountains outside Hendersonville. Later I learned that the Ukrainian Catholic Church is the same tradition as the Russian Orthodox yet is in full communion with the pope and the Catholic Church.

“I know that prayers of Pope St. John Paul and my Polish grandmother, who had a deep faith, helped me find my way back to

the Church. That Pope St. John Paul teaches that the Church needs to breathe with two lungs does not strike me as coincidental.”

“In 2000 I began wandering into both downtown St. Peter’s churches, the Catholic one and the Episcopalian one. I liked the peace and quiet. But the Catholic St. Peter’s had something the Episcopalian one didn’t: the Eucharist.” Then, in 2002, at the Easter Mass at St. Peter’s Church, Bezner came back into the Catholic Church.

A few years later, Bezner began attending services at St. Basil the Great Ukrainian Catholic Mission in Charlotte. “I simply love the Byzantine liturgy and the emphasis that is placed in this rite on praying the Hours, the psalms, and on compunction and *penthos* (godly sorrow). The purity and austerity and beauty that I was thinking was in Buddhism was all along in the Catholic Church, particularly in the Eastern rite. I love the austerity I found in the Eastern Church—the richness of the liturgy, the emphasis on the Jesus Prayer.”

Entering the Ukrainian Catholic Church was a return of sorts for Bezner. His paternal grandfather was Ukrainian. When his grandfather and Polish grandmother married, they needed a dispensation from the Church for disparity of cult. “It’s possible that my grandfather was Ukrainian Catholic”, he said. “From what I can tell, he was born and grew up in the part of Ukraine that was Ukrainian Catholic.”

Bezner’s collection of poems reflects what he calls “a nostalgic regret . . . great sadness that I left the faith”. The poems, though, also show the immense power of a patient God who continuously reaches out to His children.

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Reference

1. Kaufmann Publishing, \$16.95.