

Roy Schoeman, who is still alive, was born in 1951 in New York city. His Jewish parents had fled to the U.S. from Germany when Adolf Hitler was coming to power. His parents were practicing Jews and thus he was raised in the Jewish faith, which he very much embraced. After high school he enrolled in college at MIT and did graduate studies at Harvard in economics. It was during this time that he gave up belief in God, although still desiring the transcendent and fulfillment. He became a faculty member at Harvard business school, expecting this to bring him the fulfillment he desired. When it didn't, he fell into a sort of depression or despair. Then he was out walking one day, thinking about all of this, when, in an instant, the visible world (as he recounted it) became transparent. While he could still see the material world, he explained, he could also see through it into the spiritual realm, even the heavenly realm. He would later say that after this experience, it was hard for him to see how he *couldn't* have known or seen it before. During this experience, he saw a man and, without being told, he knew it was God; he experienced the deep and abiding love of God; his despondency was gone. But the man had not told him his name so Roy did not know how to follow Him, what religion to be of, His religion. He did not know that the man who appeared to him was our Lord, Jesus Christ, until about a year later when, after he had gone to bed and fallen asleep, the most beautiful lady he had ever seen appeared to him and spoke with him. He experienced this as if completely awake. He knew instantly that she was the mother of Christ. When he awoke, there was no question that the man-God who had appeared to him about a year earlier was, of course, none other than Jesus Christ. He then began to seek out Christianity. He eventually found the Catholic Church and is now whole-heartedly and enthusiastically Catholic.

If you like, you can listen to Mr. Schoeman tell of his experience and conversion online at:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EWDevlijGUI&t=48s> or read it at: <https://catholiceducation.org/en/faith-and-character/roy-schoeman-s-conversion-story.html>.

Roy described that first day, when the material world “became transparent” in these words: “Everything changed from one moment to the next, but in such a smooth and subtle way that I was not aware of any discontinuity.” No discontinuity. You might say that a veil was simply drawn back for him. Maybe it is that when a person hears this, they too would like to experience what he experienced. Maybe you would like to see what he saw. But is this not what happened with the birth of our Lord? A veil was drawn back so that man can now see and experience God, and it was done in such a smooth and subtle way, with no discontinuity. Ultimately it was our Holy Mother who brought Roy to our Lord – yet another parallel to the birth of our Lord and to our approach to Him now. Do we appreciate the fact that what Mr. Schoeman experienced is something every single person has been offered since the birth of our Lord? But...we do have to seek Him, we do have to desire Him. Roy's despondency and lack of fulfillment is a significant part of his conversion. If we are filled up with the stuff of this world, we cannot receive our Lord. Do you want to experience what Roy experienced? Then remember the words of our Lord: seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened. Comfort is a great destroyer of that desire. Don't rely on it. It was Roy's discomfort that led him to seek and find God.

Roy experienced God and desired Him but it was a whole year before he was actually able to embrace Him or seek Him in the right direction. Why? Why the delay? Roy himself explains this by relating his thoughts on that first day when he had that direct encounter with God: “I wanted to know His name, so that I could worship Him properly, so that I could follow “His” religion. I remember silently praying “Tell me your name. I don't mind if You're Apollo, and I have to become a Roman pagan. I don't mind if You're Krishna, and I have to become a Hindu. I don't mind if You're Buddha, and I have to become a Buddhist. As long as You're not Christ, and I have to become a Christian!” (Jewish readers (Roy said) might be able to identify with this deep-rooted aversion to Christianity).” Our Lord has made Himself available to everyone. But what prevents us from really knowing Him, following Him, and being united with Him is that we don't want to accept the truth. There is a part of us that says: Listen, Jesus, you can be God but not Lord, I'll be with you, but you need to conform yourself to my expectations, my desires, my demands. I thank God for Roy Schoeman's experience. It is a great reflection on the Nativity, my response to it, and the role of our Holy Mother.

Pope Benedict XVI, one of the great teachers of the faith, especially over the last century and particular to our times, summed up many of these things in one of his homilies for Christmas. These are some excerpts:

“Again and again it astonishes us that God makes himself a child so that we may love him, so that we may dare to love him, and as a child trustingly lets himself be taken into our arms. It is as if God were saying: I know that my glory frightens you, and that you are trying to assert yourself in the face of my grandeur. So now I am coming to you as a child, so that you can accept me and love me.

I am also repeatedly struck by the Gospel writer’s almost casual remark that there was no room for them at the inn. Inevitably the question arises, what would happen if Mary and Joseph were to knock at my door. Would there be room for them? And then it occurs to us that Saint John takes up this seemingly chance comment about the lack of room at the inn, which drove the Holy Family into the stable; he explores it more deeply and arrives at the heart of the matter when he writes: “he came to his own, and his own people received him not.” The great moral question of our attitude towards the homeless, towards refugees and migrants, takes on a deeper dimension: do we really have room for God when he seeks to enter under our roof? Do we have time and space for him? Do we not actually turn away God himself? We begin to do so when we have no time for God. The faster we can move, the more efficient our time-saving appliances become, the less time we have. And God? The question of God never seems urgent. Our time is already completely full. But matters go deeper still. Does God actually have a place in our thinking? Our process of thinking is structured in such a way that he simply ought not to exist. Even if he seems to knock at the door of our thinking, he has to be explained away. If thinking is to be taken seriously, it must be structured in such a way that the “God hypothesis” becomes superfluous. There is no room for him. Not even in our feelings and desires is there any room for him. We want ourselves. We want what we can seize hold of, we want happiness that is within our reach, we want our plans and purposes to succeed. We are so “full” of ourselves that there is no room left for God. And that means there is no room for others either, for children, for the poor, for the stranger. By reflecting on that one simple saying about the lack of room at the inn, we have come to see how much we need to listen to Saint Paul’s exhortation: “Be transformed by the renewal of your mind” (Rom 12:2). Paul speaks of renewal, the opening up of our intellect, of the whole way we view the world and ourselves. The conversion that we need must truly reach into the depths of our relationship with reality. Let us ask the Lord that we may become vigilant for his presence, that we may hear how softly yet insistently he knocks at the door of our being and willing. Let us ask that we may make room for him within ourselves, that we may recognize him also in those through whom he speaks to us: children, the suffering, the abandoned, those who are excluded and the poor of this world.

Linked to God’s glory on high is peace on earth among men. Where God is not glorified, where he is forgotten or even denied, there is no peace either. Nowadays, though, widespread currents of thought assert the exact opposite: they say that religions, especially monotheism, are the cause of the violence and the wars in the world. If there is to be peace, humanity must first be liberated from them. Belief in one God, is said to be arrogance, a cause of intolerance, because [of] its claim to possess the sole truth...It is true that religion can become corrupted and hence opposed to its deepest essence...We must be on the lookout for these distortions of the sacred...yet it is not true that denial of God would lead to peace. If God’s light is extinguished, man’s divine dignity is also extinguished. Then the human creature would cease to be God’s image...[which leads to] the kind of arrogant violence that then arises, the way man then despises and tramples upon man.

There is another verse from the Christmas story on which I should like to reflect with you – the angels’ hymn of praise... There is no question of attempting to understand the meaning of it all, but simply the overflowing happiness of seeing the pure splendor of God’s truth and love. ... Once the angels departed...The shepherds went with haste to Bethlehem. The shepherds made haste. Holy curiosity and holy joy impelled them. In our case, it is probably not very often that we make haste for the things of God. God does not feature among the things that require haste. The things of God can wait, we think and we say. And yet he is the most important thing, ultimately the one truly important thing. Why should we not also be moved by curiosity to see more closely and to know what God has said to us? At this hour, let us ask him to touch our hearts with the holy curiosity and the holy joy of the shepherds, and thus let us go over joyfully to Bethlehem, to the Lord who today once more comes to meet us.”

*God bless you and Merry Christmas, Fr Kuhn.*