

A LETTER TO ROME

Dearest Rome,

Your streets, those antique and storied roads, have yet to grace my feet; for the duration of my life I was cradled by your faithful outposts, those younger and minor realms. Your walled citadel, born and sustained by blood, some corrupt and some pure, has surrounded my imagination more than it has surrounded my travels. And though we have never met, you know me still.

A far better son, whose words I often hold, whose prayers I often covet, whose life I emulate too well and too poorly, said, "Late have I loved you, beauty so old and so new." He said this of your Triune God; I say this of you. I cannot say this of your God, for indeed I departed from your pew because my young piety was so zealous, too zealous to see I was already where I needed to be; I had not the eyes to see you offered Him to me.

Washed in your font and nursed in the light of your stained glass, from cradle to confirmation, I sat at your table until the ripe age of seventeen, when I thought I knew better. My wish to follow Jesus led me away from your doors, and yet He remained where I was leaving. For almost two decades I wandered the outer halls of your Christendom, delighted and matured, befriended and strengthened, educated and sanctified, though always outside of the room you built, outside of the very source of those graces I loved and sought. I was in the courtyard as you persisted and invited me under your roof. I stayed where I thought the fire was warmest. I only had the moon, sometimes among the lunatics; you were the sun. But you had mercy, even there. And you fed me and nourished plausibility. I devoured the scraps that came out from you, that you did not hoard for your people alone, that you give to the world, even the world that has most vehemently protested your existence or tried to revolutionize what belongs to you alone.

In the courtyard I enjoyed my formal studies. My love for learning and for the classics led me to another one of your outposts, who welcomed me as their own, though my denial masked the reality from them that I indeed was one with them, born of that same water. Ever haunted by my time at The University of Dallas, when my quiet and acceptable protest kept many more graces from me, I could not help but place myself there time and again, many times over in my memory and only three times since by foot. And each time I have become more aware of what I ignored, though at the time I swelled with learning. But you had mercy, even there. And you fed me and nourished plausibility.

To Canterbury I descended, collared for service, there because she looked so much like you and yet was familiar enough to not require more than I could give. There, because it was the likeness of that for which I longed. There, because it was the likeness of that with which I was most comfortable. There, because the middle way too often feels like the high road, the more peaceful way, especially amidst life's storms. But you had mercy, even there. And you fed me and nourished plausibility. There, your Triune God took my motives and reasons for such a trek and deepened his questions to me, pointing my affections beyond the courtyard, back down that path upon which I once sought escape.

Some told me of your faults; I have my own. We both know those too well. But, like a holiday home of hearty humanity, neither your faults nor mine would keep me from the graces that enter therein. And, like my Hippo brother, I saw others fall to the weight of your glory, friends and scholars alike, all of whom, no doubt, have their own reasons for such mutations. But your God is immutable,

and you are patient, like Him, when your sons walk not in straight lines. Though one would have been sufficient, I had many Monicas who saw that I would once again stand where they stood.

Walls then crumble and homes stumble, roofs collapse and bonds break. Clouds descend to drive winds against our faces. We are driven back. Headwinds press the paradoxical journey back, for there we can go forward. And forward I went, without an idea of whether the door was to be opened from the outside or inside. At the threshold I stood, knocking for the one who held the thresh for me.

In the thirty-fifth year of my life, your booth accepted my tears, as it had done in the eighth year; your paternal servant listened to me without agenda. Under that cathedral bell, in front of that yard of saintly bones, that very yard where as a college student I would read Edwards with resolution, you fed me. Your servant listened to my story with a divine patience. "The table is yours," he confessed, and I did sit and eat, bringing to the sacrifice of your altar what remained in my hands: my ambition, my children, my career, my plans, be they fulfilled or crushed. Upon my Bunyan back my burdens came with me, and yet your Christ's yoke is easy; His burden is light.

In that Diocesan library, your law said I could not enter; a collared man who guards the door, more courageous and virtuous than me, said otherwise. You said he could do that; I trust you. My shame said I should not enter; a threshold font deeper and holier than me reflected a different story. My ignorance and lack of faith said I didn't have what it takes; four Doctors painted high on the walls which overlook that altar made better arguments.

I have now returned to each of your major outposts which sustained my life, which tethered my deeper imagination to your creed. I have sat in those same quiet spaces where I sat as a boy and even joined my fellow celestial citizens at your table, them not knowing how I had come to that very pew; neither did I know the pages of their story.

Your Augustine played no small part, as our God only knows. Your Chesterton's size was no match for my doubt. And his jollity was inexcusable save the soil you were to him (and in this I hope, in time, you will return that mighty favor and prove him the powerful canon he is). Those fresh words of St. Teresa of Avila placed me more firmly in your hands. In your keepers' homilies, I hung on every word, like Augustine before Ambrose. Your Herbert and Lewis, though never making the leap, pressed on me the virtues necessary for my own reversal, the only reversal in my power to take.

The syllogisms were strong, but not enough; I had already conversed with them many times over. The sacred tradition was stronger still, as was the Latin, which has made all my loves brighter and clearer. The Sacred Scriptures never failed. The poetry and art were strongest, including the drama of the liturgy and that deeper script planted in me since I was a boy. Still, the man who wishes to understand your bountiful table cannot do so from the courtyard. Despite my learning, it wasn't the noise of the theologians, but the quiet draw of the sanctuary I remember as a boy that now filled the void, the exalted crucifix and the joyful memorial of your sacrifice that proved what each of life's thresholds was about, even those through which I trembled to walk. Zealously buttressed by the prayers of your saints—those now beyond your cathedral ceiling and those living here within your walls, some whom took no shame in saying what they wished for my faith—your walls pressed in on me until I collapsed under the weight of their glory.

I am at your altar again, far beneath your crucifix. I am Bilbo home, Oliver rescued from Fagan, Israel fed. I am Chesterton's journeyman circled back, Augustine's defiance defeated, Odysseus restored in Ithaca, alone just the same with perhaps no fewer comrades lost along the way. I am Jonah rescued, Noah on dry ground, the prodigal son at the undeserving banquet. I am Catholic.

In Your Hands,

Brian G. Daigle

On the Feast of St. Andrew the Apostle, 2022

Originally published in the St. Austin Review, [March/April 2023 edition](#)