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From Zen Monk to Catholic: A British Soldier's Conversion Story

In an article for the National Catholic Register, K V Turley tells the story of Stephen Williams, raised without faith, who embraced Zen Buddhism before a surprising encounter led him to Catholicism and Opus Dei.

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Stephen Williams has been on quite a journey.

Coming from a broken home, he ended up seeking refuge in the British Army, where the order and discipline provided exactly what he craved. However, decades later, his return to civilian life triggered a personal crisis — one that led an agnostic to become a Zen Buddhist monk, then a Catholic, and eventually part of the Personal Prelature of Opus Dei.

Today, now recently retired, Williams lives with his wife and son in Macclesfield, a town in the northwest of England, and it was from there he told his story to the Register.

Born in Stockport, Cheshire, in 1959, he describes his childhood as “unhappy — my father was distant and prone to violence. My mother, a loving and gentle character, was afraid of him.” When he was 14 years

old, William's parents divorced, an experience he describes as "heart-breaking." Thereafter, his life was split between time with his mother and time with his father.

Inevitably, his schooling suffered and he began to abuse alcohol, which in turn led to him getting into trouble with the police. Things got even worse for the young man when his father started a relationship with a woman who had three children from a previous marriage. Williams' fragile hold on any type of family life crumbled.

"I was 17 at the time, and my stepmother soon made it clear to me that I was not part of the deal," he remembers. It was time for him to make his own way in the world — but where?

"My options were limited," Williams says. "Work at the local automobile exhaust pipe factory, serve in the

army, or end up at the young offenders' detention center." He decided to try his luck as a soldier, and so, in 1980, he signed up for a three-year tour of duty. As it turned out, Williams was to serve 22 years in the military — a time, he says, that just "flew by." Serving on peacekeeping missions in the Persian Gulf, Bosnia, Cyprus and the Falkland Islands, he says that he was not "involved in anything dangerous" but that "they were tough years."

During this time, he made another life-changing decision when, in 1982, he met and married Jeanette. But at the same time, another equally momentous decision was forced upon him. To marry in an Episcopal church, he had to be baptized — so he agreed. "I took it as just another formality, to which I attached no value," he says. "With the same parsimony with which I had applied to my superiors for the necessary

permissions for the wedding, I stood in front of a baptismal font and let them sprinkle my head.”

At 42, he left the military — and the only way of life he had ever known. A perfunctory two-week course was meant to prepare him for his return to civilian life, but he says he learned little more than how to complete a resume. Inevitably, the transition proved difficult. “Overnight, I went from having a place in life to being a nobody,” he observes. But an even deeper personal crisis was about to unfold.

Williams felt lost. “It was frustrating,” he says. “I realized that I had to do something if I didn’t want to lose my way.”

He began reading books on religion and visited a local church seeking solace, but this did not give him any peace. One thing did, however — Buddhist meditation. And so, he

began to consider Zen Buddhism as “the answer” to his quest. Soon, he was involved with a Manchester-based Buddhist group, one affiliated with Kanshoji Monastery in France. And, later, it was to there he would make frequent visits, spending up to three months at a time.

Looking back now, he can see that the rigid discipline and well-defined hierarchy in the monastery mirrored his positive experiences in the military. “This order was precisely what I was looking for after leaving the army,” he explains. And so, perhaps not surprisingly, in 2017, he was ordained a Zen monk.

But things were to take an even more mysterious turn still.

The Zen monastery had been built on the site of a former Catholic orphanage. Though abandoned at the beginning of the 20th century,

some of its Christian icons had been retained by the Buddhist monks.

Williams recalls: “There was a cross at the entrance of the monastery and another one in the main building. One day I was cleaning one of the upper rooms. I found a stained-glass window with a cross on it. Suddenly, I felt an irresistible impulse to pray an Our Father. And I did so.”

For a Zen monk, the irony was not lost on him. “There I was, a Buddhist monk,” he says, “praying to the Lord.” But he can now see that this curious event triggered an unexpected reaction as the surrounding region seemed to be replete with Catholic icons, and, so thereafter, every time his eyes alighted upon one, he found himself once more feeling “the need to pray.”

Returning to England, he came across the writings of Thomas Merton, the 20th-century Trappist

monk who had studied and written on Zen Buddhism. As a result of this discovery, Williams became “intrigued” by the Catholic monastic tradition, soon finding himself “deeply inspired” by what he was encountering, specifically in the Trappist and Carthusian monastic traditions.

In 2018, he and his wife went on a tour that included a stop in Rome. Inadvertently, he joined pilgrims at a papal event at St. Peter’s, an experience that left a deep impression. A year later, he returned to the Eternal City, this time for an entire week.

“One day, I went for a walk,” he begins, “and found a small chapel decorated with 4th-century frescoes. It is difficult to describe the feeling of calm and stillness I experienced. In all my years of Zen practice, I had never felt such deep peace. I

returned daily until the end of our stay. I sat quietly and enjoyed the tranquillity. After some research, I discovered that the building belonged to enclosed nuns. On another outing, I found a church with a painting by Caravaggio entitled 'The Vocation of St Matthew,' which I found deeply moving. Christ points to Matthew, and Matthew points to himself in astonishment, as if to say: 'Are you calling me?'"

From then on, things began to change for Williams. While he acknowledges that certain aspects of his Buddhist experience stayed with him, the "fervor and intensity of that life" no longer "resonated." More important still, he realized that Zen had not given him answers to many of his deeper questions.

Back in England, in 2020 just as the COVID-19 pandemic began, Williams started attending Holy Mass and

exploring the Catholic faith. “I devoured homilies and Scripture readings,” he recalls. His newfound interest in Catholicism amazed his still-agnostic wife, who, he says, was even more surprised by this than by his dalliance with Buddhism.

But he still had more to discover about Catholicism. A friend introduced him to Opus Dei, a personal prelature within the Church dedicated to spreading the message that every person is called to holiness and that every honest work can be sanctified.

Williams contacted a local center for more information, making it clear he was a Buddhist, not a Catholic. It made little difference to those with whom he spoke, and in 2021, he was received into the Catholic Church. In time, a vocation to Opus Dei also became part of his spiritual path — a path very different from his former

one but one that, he says, has changed his relationship not just with God but with his wife and family, and gave him a desire to help bring those around him “closer to God, little by little.”

Looking back on his eventful life, Williams reflects, “I wish I had known more about Catholicism sooner.” Yet, he adds, “my time in Zen Buddhism wasn’t wasted, as I learned the value of silence and the meaning of: ‘Be still and know that I am God.’”

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