

God is sneaky. Sometimes he abruptly puts roadblocks in our lives that alter our direction. In my case, he allowed me to take a long, bumpy road in finding my way home.

For the first 30 years of my life, I was a relatively happy and content Wisconsin Lutheran Synod Christian. My family was always active in our church, we were taught to know and love our Savior, and one of my older brothers went to the seminary to become a Lutheran minister. My siblings and I were brought up loving the Lord. However, there was always a strong subliminal distain--almost contempt--for all things Catholic. We separated ourselves (to the extreme), and I was discouraged from having close Catholic friends. The explanation given was that Catholics didn't believe what we believed: They worshipped Mary, they added a lot of man-made rules and ideas that weren't based on the Bible, and they were taught that they had to do good works in order to earn their way to heaven.

As with most Protestants, discussion of Mary was virtually nonexistent. Any mention of Jesus' Mother was confined to the Christmas season, and even then any references to her were fleeting. We were taught that she was nothing more than the vessel or receptacle chosen by God to give birth to His Son. I remember having pleasant, vague thoughts about Mary when I was a child, my curiosity probably stemming from the love I felt for my own Mother. But I didn't verbally question the guidance I received from my parents and teachers through the years.

Tragedy struck our family more than once in my growing up. My oldest brother drown in a boating accident when he was 17. And I was raped and stabbed as a teenager. Through all the difficult times, my parents were living proof of the faith and trust that we all need to have in our Lord. They were my inspiration, and

although I struggled, their strength helped me to retain the faith that I had been brought up with from childhood. As I got older, I found myself with questions about the foundations of my Lutheran faith. I kept my questions hidden away, because I didn't know what to do with them. I didn't want to betray my parents, who had been such an inspiration to me. But through the years, the questions remained.

Much to the chagrin of my parents, at 21 I married an unbeliever. Although my parents had always wanted me to seek someone of our faith, it was my feeling that God had put him in my life to be the influence and guiding factor in bringing him to Christ. I had not relied on prayer or the advice of my parents in making my decision. I acted only on feelings in marrying him. During the 15 years of our marriage, I was never able to break through my husband's barrier toward God. My faith life gradually became battered and worn, and I got to the point where I truly didn't know what was right anymore. I felt like a single mother when I took our children to church on Sundays. I talked the talk, but I wasn't walking the walk anymore. My marriage was falling apart, and I felt empty inside.

At 36, divorced with two daughters, I began dating a wonderful guy who was divorced with three children. Ron was a thoughtful and caring man, who was a good Dad, and truly the kind of spiritual leader for his family that I was looking for. As it turned out, I quickly learned that Ron was a cradle Catholic. I found his faith background very different--and I found it curiously interesting. Attending Mass with him didn't have the scary "lightning-will-strike-me-dead" atmosphere I was taught I'd most certainly feel if I ever walked into a Catholic church.

As with a lot of cradle Catholics, Ron wasn't able to answer some of the questions I asked him. He strongly loved his faith, but had never spent a great

deal of time studying the background of his faith. So together we began to seek out the answers to our questions.

I can't say that my conversion was easy or quick. We went to Bible study classes together, and Ron and I attended not one, but three years of RCIA classes together. Even then I just wasn't ready to make the commitment. I still struggled with the hurdles of Mary, the rosary, and purgatory. Some of the old hangups haunted me. But the Holy Spirit was ever steadfast. I ultimately did convert 6 years ago. However, my conversion was still a work in progress, as my heart was not fully accepting of all of the Truths that were opening up to me. My husband still had to drag me to confession, which I insisted didn't have to be more than once a year, if that. I had become a Catholic in name, but not in conviction.

Several years ago, a Catholic friend of mine who knew I was struggling, gave me a book about the power of the rosary. At the time I thanked her, but inside I told myself that I'd never read it. I buried the book under several other books on my nightstand, figuring maybe some day I'd glance through it just to humor her.

In our pursuit to keep our marriage solid, Ron and I attended a National Marriage Encounter weekend in 2001. This was a very moving experience, and through the weekend we were exposed to the concept of couple prayer. Both of us had always done our praying separately, but we found beauty and strength in uniting our prayer life. Our weekend was hugely instrumental in bringing both of us closer to the Lord, and in bringing me closer to home.

Lent of 2004 was the turning point of my existence. Ron and I went to see one of the first showings of the Passion of the Christ. We knew from all we had heard that it would be a marvelous Lenten experience. Little did I know that it would be

absolutely life-changing for me. As the movie progressed, I felt as though God were peeling layers of scales from my eyes--so much so, that even as I walked out of the theater into the darkness of evening, I felt blinded by the bright light. I couldn't stop weeping. I was so filled with remorse and humbleness, yet so filled with joy and happiness. I tried, but had trouble explaining to my husband what had happened to me. That night, an old rosary that I had previously kept around only because of its simple beauty, found its way into my hand. I didn't immediately begin using it, but for many nights I fell asleep holding it, and its presence gave me an overwhelming sense of calm that I had never felt before. Suddenly, confession became all important to me, and I wanted to know everything about the Jewel that God had blessed me with.

A few days after seeing *The Passion*, I heard a priest on Catholic radio talk about something called the Chaplet of Divine Mercy. I had no idea what he was talking about, but I felt a tremendous urge to know more about it. During my lunch that day, I tried looking up information about the Chaplet on the Internet. In my haste, I was unable to locate anything in the time that I had, which greatly bothered me. I went home that afternoon quite frustrated because of the immense stirring inside me. To distract myself, I decided to clean our bedroom. In straightening my nightstand, a book fell to the floor. It landed open, face down. I could see by the cover that it was the book on the power of the rosary that my friend had given me years ago, but which I had never opened. I picked it up and saw that something had fallen out of the book. I turned it over. It was a copy of the Chaplet of Divine Mercy. I don't have to tell you that I was so moved that I fell to my knees, grabbed that old rosary, and used it for the first time to say the chaplet. Since that time, I have found the beauty and peace of saying the rosary as well, and I thank the Lord (and his dear, Blessed Mother) every day for not giving up on me.

As I said before, God is sneaky. If someone had told me when I was younger that I'd be where I am spiritually today, I'd have emphatically said, "Not a chance!" I've had some life-changing experiences in my life, but I see now that all the bumps in the road have helped in leading me to my Catholic conversion. It's been a long journey. I'm now 52, but I feel like a child in total awe of our Lord God. I'm in love with my Catholic faith, and I'm living proof that there is hope for all.

God is so very good.