

## Saving Private Christy

It was 2 o'clock in the morning and I was standing watch beside my foxhole. The triple canopy jungle made it so dark that I couldn't see my hands, but I could see the ground because small phosphorescent twigs had transformed it into a sea of glowing red. I was sitting on my helmet with my rifle in my lap, watching and listening for the enemy. Maybe it was the surreal setting, but somehow my thoughts were about God. I was thinking about His omnipotence and His omnipresence. I had come to the conclusion that He must be pure energy, because energy is everywhere and it certainly could be all-powerful.

I figure that God must have a sense of humor, because while I was sitting there my legs fell asleep. When I tried to get up I fell flat on my face. I love how God often shows us the literal to point us to the figurative. After all, how does one have a relationship with energy? The truth of it was that I didn't have a clue who God was, or even who I was.

During the next six months I endured many hardships. I sat under my poncho for five days without food waiting for a typhoon to pass. I didn't bathe, shave, or brush my teeth for three months because we had just enough water to drink. Much of the time I was in so much physical pain from carrying 80 pounds of gear in 100-degree heat that I really didn't care if the North Vietnamese shot me. About half of my company had been killed or wounded and the rest of us were operating in survival mode.

One day my squad was walking point for the company when we heard an explosion behind us. Our lieutenant had just stepped on a mine. He was killed instantly. We were so battle hardened by that time that we just sat down and ate our lunch. I remember feeling no particular emotion as we sat in the middle of the minefield waiting for the minesweepers to arrive. The NVA began shooting mortars at us and the only thought that came to mind was "Boy are these guys lousy shots." We didn't pray for the lieutenant. And we didn't pray for ourselves' and we felt no emotion. God seemed so far away.

About two months later I was riding on top of an armored personnel carrier with my M-60 machine gun in my lap when the driver made a sharp turn. I kept going straight. I flew through the air like Superman, and landed on my wrist and shoulder. I realized that my wrist was broken when I tried to pull myself back onto the APC. I was med-evaced back to the rear the next morning. They put a cast on my arm and gave me some Darvon for the pain.

I spent the next thirty days in the rear waiting for my wrist to heal. I don't really know what happened to me during that time, but somehow I lost it. I was experiencing extreme depression and anxiety, so I went to the battalion aid station. They eventually shipped me to the Philadelphia Naval Hospital. I remember waking up each morning hoping that this day would be better than the last, but it wasn't. It is so difficult to describe the mental pain that would not leave.

After several months they sent me home. I felt like a failure and I wasn't even old enough to vote. Later a friend gave me a book titled "Guns Up". It was my story with one important difference. The main character in the book had a strong faith that carried him through. I would like to go to the wall in Washington DC someday to see which of my friends made it out alive, but it would be futile because I knew most of them only by their first name and by their courage.

I tried going back to the university, but I couldn't concentrate, so I went back to working in construction. Then I met Mary, fell in love and got married. If it hadn't been for her I probably would have failed again. It is amazing what love can do.

About a year later I began working for H&F Builders tarring basements. I worked my way up to the framing crew and finally to superintendent and partner of the company.

After ten years of marriage Adam was born. Our joy turned to sorrow when the doctor told us that he had Down syndrome. Adam had some medical problems, so we had to leave him in the hospital for thirty days. After a period of grieving for the son we expected, we brought Adam home. He became a blessing for our family. It was Adam that taught me how to love as a father. Three years later Michael came along. He blessed our family with all the normal things like a lost turtle, school, overnight friends, soccer, baseball and football.

One day Mary asked me (for the third time) if I was ready to join the Church. To her surprise, I said yes. That is when things really started to happen. The RCIA process began to open my eyes and ears to faith. I learned that God was my Father, and He loved me with an everlasting love. Many friendships developed with the other candidates, and I truly felt at one with Christ's body, the Church.

When I began Bible study I experienced Jesus present in the Word. I feel His presence so strongly as I attend class. Scripture for me has become like looking through a kaleidoscope, every time you give it a twist a new and beautiful image is discovered. I feel like one of the men on the road to Emmaus in Luke 24 "Were not our hearts burning [within us] while He spoke to us on the way and opened the scriptures to us?" Our class has developed into a real faith sharing community. Our time

together is one of the highlights of my week. I had no idea that getting together to share our faith could be so rewarding.

St. Cecilia's church began Perpetual Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament eight years ago. I was one of the first to sign up. Jesus taught me how to pray as I knelt before Him in the chapel. I asked him to help me open my heart to Him and He filled it with the joy of His presence. I offered tears more precious than gold as I felt Him embrace me with His love. I asked Him to reveal Himself to me so that I might know Him. He placed within me such a desire to know Him that over the next several years I read about 30 books and listened to at least 100 hours of audiotapes. Friends who knew me would have thought that this was like an eighty-year-old lady having a baby because reading was not one of my habits.

One day as I was leaving Adoration I felt that He was asking me to do something. I felt that He was asking me to clear away the ice that had been warmed by the sun on the church courtyard. Now this was a little unusual since I hadn't even shoveled my own driveway since my back surgery two years earlier, but I drove home and got my shovel anyway. I was just going to clear a path, but after that I thought, "Did Jesus just carry the cross until he got tired? No, He carried it all the way to Golgotha and then He let them nail Him to it." So I shoveled the entire courtyard and all the sidewalks at the church. I was just glad He didn't ask me to shovel the parking lot as well.

I learned more about Jesus that morning than I had learned in the previous ten years. I got several blisters from all the shoveling. I liked that they reminded me of my encounter with Jesus. When they healed I thought it was time to work for him again.

One day it was announced that RCIA needed people to volunteer to be sponsors for the people joining the Church. Once again I heard Jesus calling me, and I gave my yes. I remember on Easter Vigil Father was dipping the Pascal candle in the baptismal font and calling upon the Holy Spirit. At that very moment a bold gust of wind blew behind the altar where we were standing. The side doors were open, and it could have been a coincidence, but my eyes of faith saw the presence of the Holy Spirit moving over the water as in Exodus 14. "Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea and the Lord swept the sea with a strong east wind throughout the night and so turned it into dry land. When the water was thus divided, the Israelites marched into the midst of the sea on dry land, with the water like a wall to their right and to their left." The Pascal candle looked a lot like a staff, and Father looked a lot like Moses as he held it in the water. Moses led the Hebrews on an exodus from slavery.

Father was in the person of Jesus leading the catechumens on a new exodus from the bondage of sin. I often wish that I could have lived in biblical times to see the miracles as they happened. But what would Moses think? Would he wish that he would be here now to see the new exodus? I shared this story with the group afterwards and one of the other sponsors said, "I felt it too!"

By this time I was beginning to understand what service is all about. Story County was starting up a new Habitat for Humanity affiliate, and they asked me to be a board member. I thought I could make a difference so I said yes. Habitat for Humanity is a Christian organization that builds homes for families in need. Labor is donated and the family only pays for the cost of materials through an interest-free loan. This money is then used to finance the next home.

The second house that Story County Habitat did was a move and a remodel. I would rather take a beating than remodel so I didn't help on that one. Bob and Dale worked for eight months building the foundation and remodeling the house. I was so impressed by their dedication that I volunteered to be the site coordinator for the duplex that we were building in Ames. I spent the next twenty Saturdays on that project. To my amazement Bob and Dale were right there with me.

If it wasn't for their example I wouldn't have gotten as involved. During the next eight years I helped to build fourteen homes for families who otherwise would never be able to afford one. Once again community was key in changing me.

As a result of my connections to Habitat and my work, I had the opportunity to plan and blitz-build a four-plex for the Emergency Residence Project. ERP provides transitional housing for families who have no other place to stay. We built this 5,000 square foot four-plex from framing to carpet in just three weeks with the help of 1,200 ISU students. I also coordinated eighty businesses that volunteered labor and materials.

I felt God's presence so strongly while we were building the shelter. I felt that we were standing on Holy Ground. We prayed for good weather and we prayed for safety. Our prayers were answered when we got sunshine and 65-degree weather in November.

Then something amazing happened. Joe grabbed a student by the sweatshirt with one hand and pulled him back onto the second story deck. I have no idea how he had the presence of mind and the strength to do that. When I asked him, he told me that he saw the student and he knew he was going to fall so he grabbed him. It seemed as though God had wanted me to be a witness so that I would know that He is God.

The harder I worked on the shelter, the more I felt God's presence. One morning the plan was to pour twenty-five yards of concrete.

I expected twenty men to show up, but my workforce consisted of one eighteen-year old girl. By the way, I was really proud of her. She was there just to take roll, and she ended up working harder than she had ever worked before. She told me that her father was a concrete man. He must have been proud of her when she told him her story. Anyway, we had about 100 lineal feet of sidewalk and a parking lot to grade so we got to work. I was completely exhausted by 10 o'clock and we still didn't have any help. This was the last weekend before the blitz-build so I didn't dare cancel the concrete. Just before the first truck arrived, about six students showed up. Unfortunately none of them had any concrete experience. About that time my good friend Harry drove by. He took one look at the situation and realized I was in trouble. Harry worked with me the next four hours finishing concrete. When the last truck was empty I was just about dead. On the way home I felt peace and joy and presence of the Lord.

One day Jeff asked if I would take a look at the home that Friendship Ark had purchased. He wanted some advice on how to make it more usable. Friendship Ark is a group home for handicapped adults, which focuses on the spiritual aspects of community living. I thought I could organize the remodeling like I had the Emergency Residence Project, so I asked the Knights of Columbus to participate. In the next three months we transformed the attached garage into a handicapped bathroom and two bedrooms. We also built a detached two and one half-car garage. We shared our prayers and devotions and created our own faith community.

Many times I have prayed to God to ask what it is that he would like me to do with my life. The answer that I hear is as challenging as it is simple. To share the gifts he has given me. Last year Mary and I built a home for Friendship Ark on Kansas Avenue. The home was completed in December 2003 and was occupied in January. One of the occupants is our son Adam. We are finding how difficult it is to be separated from the one that we love so very much. Adam is the gift from God that we will have the most difficulty sharing. With Michael in college and Adam living in a group home, Mary and I are empty nesters for the first time in twenty two years. Although we are currently grieving our loss, we are looking forward to the new opportunities that we will have to share together.

God had to teach me about love before I could know him. As it says in 1 John "Whoever is without love does not know God, for God is love ". When I was a soldier I knew God only as Creator. He created everything in the universe, so how could He possibly care about someone as insignificant as me. I might as well have been a grain of sand in the desert.

When I became a father God showed me by example the relationship He wanted me to have with Him. I became the student as Adam and Michael taught me how to love like a father. Until then I couldn't understand that He loved me as His son. He loved me so much that He sent His only begotten Son to die for me on a cross.

My life changed the day I joined the Church. Through the RCIA process and Confirmation I was given the grace to see God in places where I'd never seen Him before. When I encountered Jesus in the Word, my eyes and ears were opened. When I met Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament, I asked him to change my heart and He did. I once asked Him to knock me off my horse like Paul, but I didn't have a horse and he didn't need another Paul. His call is so gentle so as not to jeopardize my free choice. He cares a lot about free choice. I suppose that's why He allows evil to exist in the world.

A friend once said to me, "It doesn't matter what you do, it matters who you are." It frightens me to think who I would be if it wasn't for the faith communities of family, church, Bible study, Eucharistic Adoration, Habitat for Humanity and Friendship Ark. God shares His wisdom, as we are able to understand it. The Holy Spirit within us will show us the way if we will only listen. The language of God is love. To see God more clearly we must see with the heart.

Alan Christy

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