

If Only We Knew Then, What We Know Now!

Growing Up Catholic

Russ:

I was born in 1958 and as an infant was baptized into the Catholic faith. Though there were no spiritual devotions or religious discussion at home my parents made sure we went to church and Christian education classes. My mother bought inexpensive pictures of the Sacred Heart of Jesus and each of my brothers and I had pictures of Jesus over our beds. I attended one year of Catholic school but changed to public schools after we moved to a new town. My earliest recollection of God was thinking to myself that I was thankful I was Catholic and felt bad for my best friend who was not. My memories of the teaching nuns were not unpleasant and I actually loved my first grade teacher, Sister Michael. She was pretty and smart and told my Mom that I was a good reader. As a special treat the nuns would sometimes let us carry their books and supplies to their convent. It was always scary and at the same time exhilarating being chosen for this honor.

I remember praying the rosary at night, usually when I was worried about something or couldn't sleep. My mother could always tell something was wrong when she would find the rosary under my covers in the morning. As a young boy, I never doubted that God was real and still continue to be thankful for this gift of faith. I do have some vague memories as a young child of leaving confession with a great feeling of having a burden lifted and a clean slate to start over. When I was 9 years old I remember confessing to the priest how I talked back to my parents and he said to me: "the chickens always come home to roost." I didn't have any idea of what he was talking about then but now as a parent of two teenage boys, I completely understand his wisdom.

Deb:

I was the youngest of 4 children. We moved from Illinois to New Jersey when I was 3 years old. I received the sacraments of Penance and First Holy Communion at St. Catherine of Sienna in Mountain Lakes, NJ. My earliest memory of relating to God was when I would look at the Bible and prayer books on our living room shelves. I remember trying to describe the pictures to my dog Reggie before I could read. I liked looking at the pictures of Jesus and his disciples.

For several years, my father gave the appearance of a devoted family man. Catholicism was in his genes. His father was a coach at Fenwick Catholic high school in Chicago. Many of my grandparent's friends were priests. I remember Mass being celebrated in their home as a young child. My mother and father met in college. She was not Catholic when they married, but eventually she converted to Catholicism. We did not talk about God in our home. The only time we prayed as a family was during grace at meals. We went to Mass every Sunday but church was more like a burden than a blessing. I remember my siblings telling me not to eat before Communion and my father quizzing them about the homily once we got back to the car. I must have been told about God's

love because I do remember believing that He loved people not necessarily me personally, but human beings in general.

When I was nine, my world came crashing down after my father announced that he was leaving my mom to marry another woman. We lived with my mother after that and visited my father and his “new family” on most weekends.

The year that I was supposed to be Confirmed, I told my mother (who had stopped going to church by that time) that I did not believe in the God of Catholicism and that I wanted to stop going to CCD. She seemed to be ok with it and I don't remember my dad putting up a fuss. So that was where my Catholic upbringing stopped.

The Rebellious Years

Russ

As I became a young teen, I was drawn to music and became enthralled with the Rock and Roll culture that was burgeoning in the 60's. Woodstock happened while I was in fifth grade and I still remember feeling disappointed that I was too young to be a part of it. Despite still going to Mass on Sunday and even playing in the Folk Mass, I started to become involved in the destructive habits of this culture and experimented with drugs and alcohol. Somehow I didn't see this as a contradiction to my Catholicism and actually never heard a sermon or teaching about drugs or alcohol or the occult in all the years I was nominally involved in the Catholic Church. My grandmother who was divorced and re-married to an ex-Catholic friar attended Mass daily. She would come over on Saturdays and entertain me with stories of astrology and reassured me that I would always have bad luck being born under the sign of the Capricorn! My step-grandfather would give magazines to my Dad and tell him not to let the boys see them because of the pictures in them. Many of my Catholic friends were actively using drugs and alcohol and experimenting with the occult. After all, this was the Age of Aquarius I was living in and the Church was not speaking to me through the deafening noise of the culture. Or, if it was speaking, I didn't hear it or chose not to.

The parish I was attending didn't have a strong devotional life and their annual New Year's Eve party was known as the wildest bash in town. I remember my Protestant friends' parents commenting on how the Catholic priests could throw a great party. I also remember having Mass in the hallways of the school because the gymnasium where we normally had Mass was being decorated for the huge New Year's Eve party. That left a lasting impression on me regarding the priorities of our parish.

My parents had a troubled marriage and the abuse of alcohol was a constant feature in my childhood. My Mom was a “closet” alcoholic and would hide bottles of alcohol around the house so my father wouldn't find out she was drinking. Over the years, she made several attempts to take her life by alcohol and pill overdoses and I now realize she was clinically depressed. One day my Mom picked us up from school and told us she was seeing a lawyer to get a divorce. She may have done that to manipulate my father since they never went through with it but things remained tense at home. My older brother and

I retreated into our own lives of music and counter-culture activities as we watched our parents slowly and methodically ruin theirs.

Despite going to Mass on Sunday and every Holy day of obligation, our practice of Catholicism did not provide any comfort to us and I basically rejected it. I remember my Dad cursing at people in the parking lot who cut him off after Church as he struggled to light his ever-present cigarette. He also was very proud of his Germanic heritage and he told us he thought Adolph Hitler had the right idea but went about it the wrong way! Paradoxically though, I remember him trying to take us to church in a snowstorm because he would never miss Sunday Mass. We pleaded with him to turn back and finally the car got stuck because the snow was so deep. That may have been the only time we missed Mass growing up. That did leave a lasting impression on me, as I knew that somehow religion had a place in his life. I later dismissed his devotion as “works oriented” and thought he went to church only as “fire-insurance.” Later on, as an adult evangelical christian, it was easy for me to miss church if we were on vacation or there was a report of pending bad weather without feeling the slightest bit of guilt for breaking one of the ten commandments.

My mother stopped going to Mass when I was very young and we usually came home from church to find her pretty well intoxicated. It seemed she used Sunday morning as her time to escape and by the time we got home she was loaded to bear against my father and us kids. About halfway through Sunday dinner, she would start verbally abusing my father and my brothers and I would leave the house as the fighting escalated.

Deb

After I left the Catholic Church I decided to join the choir at my friend Renee's Episcopal church. I liked singing and that gave me a sense of still being a part of something religious. At some point I decided that other things were more important and quit the choir. That is when I began making some of the most regretful choices of my life. At the age of 12 I got into the party scene which was extremely pervasive in our small upper-middle class town. I stole liquor from my mother's house. Drugs and alcohol provided an escape and a way to rebel against a cruel world.

Ages 12-16 were my worst years in terms of being almost completely godless and without restraint. One respite however was during the last 3/4 of my 8th grade year which I spent in Catholic school. That was a very good experience. I will never forget a supernatural event that occurred on Christmas Eve when getting ready for Midnight Mass I had a vision of saints watching me. I remember feeling comforted and at peace because of the experience.

At age 16 I met Jessica. We became fast friends. She was involved in Alateen, a group for teenagers whose parent's were alcoholics. I had been worried about my parent's drinking for some time. Since the divorce my mother drank every night to the point of intoxication. She also married an alcoholic. My father and his second wife were on the verge of divorce because of their alcoholism. No one needed Ala-teen more than I.

It was at Ala-teen that I started to hear about God again for the first time in years. People talked about God as their “Higher Power.” They talked as if they knew God personally and I wanted to know him too. I would ask people from Ala-teen and Ala-non how they knew who their Higher Power was. No one could tell me.

Ala-Teen awakened in me a desire to know God that waxed and waned for the next several years. At times I would visit the church of a friend or discover that someone I worked with was a born-again Christian. I met several Protestants during this time. They were all eager to invite me to church or other Christian activities. I only remember meeting one Catholic who wanted to help me in my search for God. She told me that she had gone to retreats at the Jersey shore but did not give me anymore information about how to sign up.

In my senior year of high school I volunteered at a suicide hotline. One evening I shared my shift with a man who was a born-again Christian he told me that Jesus loved me and died for my sins. He also said that if I didn't surrender my life to Him I would go to hell. That terrified me. When I told my mother about the experience she basically said “Don't listen to people like that.” That was enough for me and I soon forgot about the episode.

I was accepted to and began attending Plymouth State College in New Hampshire in the fall of 1982. During my freshman year I was very lonely, living at a state college seven hours from home. That year I struggled with a depression unlike any I had ever experienced. The one thing that helped me feel safe was a song by Don McLean that I would listen to over and over again on the headphones of my stereo each night before sleep. I did not know it at the time but the song was actually a verse from scripture. It had no meaning for me and God was not even mentioned in it. Psalm 137:1 “By the waters of Babylon, we lay down and wept for thee Zion. We remember thee Zion.” Who knows but that those same Saints of God who I had envisioned rooting for me before midnight Mass several years before were now pleading before the throne of God on my behalf asking Him to bring me out of captivity in Babylon and back to Zion, back to Him, to the promises made for me at my baptism, and ultimately back to his His Church.

Born-Again!

Russ

When I was 14 years old, a Catholic friend of mine who was even more involved in drugs than I was told me that he didn't want to take drugs anymore. His older sister was having Bible studies at their house and they would give you a free Bible if you attended. For some reason that intrigued me and my friend gave me his Bible to read that week before the meeting. I had never read the Bible before and my parents never owned one. It actually was the first Bible I had ever opened. It was a “Good News Bible” which was a readable watered-down version that removed all references to Blood when talking about Christ's sacrifice. I couldn't put it down and read most of the gospels that week! On Saturday night, my brother and I attended this Bible Study.

We were scared to death but the people were kind and warm and full of joy. We couldn't understand it because they weren't high and we didn't realize people could be so enthused about something without being under the influence of drugs and alcohol. There was loud singing and spontaneous prayers. Towards the end of the meeting, the leader gave a talk based on 1 Corinthians 12. He talked about the body of Christ in a way I never heard and I was mesmerized. I also recognized that this leader used to go to our Catholic church and was a pretty rough looking character in the past. At the end of the night, he asked if anyone wanted to "accept Jesus as your Savior?" I was too afraid to stand up so the other leader said, "just let them sit in their seats and say this prayer. "Jesus I am a sinner and am sorry for my sins. I believe Jesus died for me and I ask you now to come into my life and give me a new start" Wham! After praying that, my brother and I were filled with incredible joy and we left that house praising God and feeling higher than we ever had before. I felt lighter than air and couldn't wait to tell everyone what Jesus had done for me. After that born-again experience, my brother and I cut our hair, sold our guitars and amps, got rid of all the drugs and never smoked again! We were living examples of "I was messed up on drugs and now I'm messed up on the Loooord." to coin a popular joke at the time.

My parents and oldest brother thought we had found a cult and immediately took a defensive posture and called us "Jesus freaks." They anguished over this and a new tension developed in our house, as there became frequent arguments about religion. My mother insisted that we were born Catholic and should thus always remain Catholic. She had no defense of her Catholicism and my brother and I tore her theology to shreds with our new found "Bible Thumping" techniques. Her only defense to all of this was that Luther left the church because he wanted to get married and was a disobedient priest. She told us that it wasn't up to us to interpret the Bible and that was the job of the priest and the church. My Mom repeated this to us often but miss-pronounced the word interpret as "interpet." My brother and I often laughed and said to each other "You can't interpet the Bible on your own Bobby." We scoffed at all her arguments then, but now I realize how much she really did understand her Catholicism.

We began to witness to everyone we knew and as a result a small revival swept our high-school and many of our friends "received Christ" and left the Catholic Church. We regularly took up street witnessing in a small city nearby and joyfully endured ridicule and "persecution". We learned how to quote scripture and my brother and I would commit huge portions of Scripture to memory. My brother had memorized the entire epistle of James, which I now know Luther wanted to remove from the Bible! We met evangelical friends whose parents had been saved for years and we loved to visit their non-smoking homes and talk for hours about the faith with their parents. We saw Christians living out a faith that was vital and life changing. My brother and I saw families that were healthy and not dysfunctional and in retrospect, I think we blamed Catholicism for all the problems in our family. Our new-found evangelical faith impacted us in a deep way and enabled us to live chaste and devout lives.

We started attending Bible studies taught by a discipleship-type church and got most of our teaching from 18-year-old self-appointed Bible scholars, theologians, and would-be

prophets. The people we looked up to the most had dramatic conversion stories of their own and often were ex-Catholics. We began to hear how Catholicism went off track during the time of Constantine and perhaps before and were told there had always been a “remnant of true believers.” A teenage friend held Bible studies in his basement and taught me everything I ever needed to know about the “whore of Babylon” as he referred to the Catholic Church. He too was an ex-Catholic who was “born-again” at the same Bible study my brother and I attended. I accepted his word for everything and never questioned or entertained doubts due to my lack of understanding of true Catholic doctrine. We were told that Catholics worship Mary, pray to dead people, believe in works for salvation and invent their own doctrines. Not being well founded in my Catholicism and having never really embraced it as life changing, it was easy to accept these “truths” about the Church. I started to form a strong anti-Catholic bias based on my luke-warm church experience as well as the example of my parent's sad life. We felt that it couldn't possibly be the true religion since “it had a form of godliness but denied the power thereof.” There was a popular cartoon tract at the time written by an ardent anti-Catholic named Jack T. Chick and I accepted everything he wrote as if it was the Gospel.

Deb

My openness to being born-again began in my freshman year of college when I developed a close friendship with a born-again Christian. She was not afraid to tell me all about her relationship with God. We would talk for hours and she was a kind and patient friend. I distinctly remember as well that she had a boyfriend with whom she remained chaste. I was very impressed by that because everyone else I was friends with was involved in pre-marital sex. My friend gave me a Bible at the end of the spring semester. I spent a lot of time alone that year thinking about God.

After my freshman year I decided to transfer to a college closer to home. My sophomore year of college was filled with fun and friendship. The good part was that I came out of the depression I had been under during my freshman year at Plymouth State. The bad part was that I got back into the party scene and began dating a young man who took away all of my interest in God and Christianity. I also chose to major in Psychology. As I delved more heavily into psychology, I became more humanistic in my thinking.

Meanwhile, my friend Jessica from Alateen was being converted. A young man with whom she commuted to art school was a born-again Christian. He brought his Bible every day and shared with her about his relationship with Jesus. After several months of this, Jessica surrendered her life to Christ and started witnessing to me relentlessly. Whenever we got together she would talk about Jesus and the Bible non-stop. The bad thing about those conversations was that she was so pushy I felt like I was being smothered. The good thing was that I finally understood what it meant to be a Christian. I asked her a lot of questions that she had all the answers for. She told me that Jesus wanted me to surrender my life to him, give him my heart or else I would go to hell. I could see that her life was changing. She seemed happier and “clean” somehow. Mostly I just thought she was crazy though and eventually it put such a strain on our friendship, we stopped getting together.

My junior year of college was an introspective time. I had broken up with my boyfriend and worried about hell a lot. I was afraid of going there after everything Jessica told me. One day I went to Mass with my mother and her new boyfriend. It was my first Mass in many years and as I looked up at the crucifix and listened to the prayers and homily I remember thinking, "for the first time in my life I understand everything they're saying and I just don't believe it." I believed in God but I could not accept that Jesus was so important.

I did not understand why God would make one man more important than all the other men he created. In my years growing up Catholic and in all of my conversations with Jessica and my other born-again friend from Plymouth State, I never got the concept that God became man! I mistakenly thought that God exalted one man to become God.

Near the end of my junior year of college I decided that it would be good to spend my summer in the Rocky Mountains of Colorado since it was the last summer before I would have to face the "real world." As I sat in the parking lot of the YMCA of the Rockies completing a job application, I looked out onto the wide expanse of lawn owned by the camp. Sitting in large circles were groups of people who looked as if they were having Bible studies. I said to my friend "I bet this is a Christian camp. What if I come back a born-again Christian?" We both laughed and he said "If you do, I'll never speak to you again!"

It was at that YMCA camp that I had a profound conversion experience. I spent my days and nights with born-again Christians who were very excited about God and talked to me non-stop about His love for me. I felt very safe and cared for at that camp. I never met people who were so honest and concerned about others. One night at a Christian rock concert I stood up with hundreds of other people and gave my heart to Jesus. From that day on my life was changed. I felt alive and filled with love for God and others. Surrendering to God caused me to literally see everything with new eyes.

I spent my last year in college attending Bible studies and leading other students to Christ. I wanted nothing more than to tell everyone I saw about Christ's amazing gift of love and salvation. I started attending a charismatic evangelical church and was re-baptized in one of the member's bathtubs. I was also prayed for to be baptized in the Holy Spirit and one night on the way home from a Bible study received the gift of tongues. I loved reading the Psalms and soon began to memorize a variety of scriptures.

After graduating from college I went home to live with my mother and step-father. I regularly attended Bible studies and young adult coffee houses at my friend Jessica's church. I longed to serve God in full-time ministry and spent weekends going to a city park with other young-adults witnessing to strangers on the street. I attended every conference and Christian event that I could. My life revolved around friends from church and everything I said and did had the ultimate purpose of bringing others into the same relationship with God that I had.

The Church Years

Russ

When I went to college I joined a fellowship group of sincere Christians and met a devout Catholic named Bernie. He would come to our protestant praise and worship meetings on Saturday evenings but still continue to go to Mass on Sunday. He loved the Lord and had overcome an incredible physical disability in his life without murmuring or complaining. It puzzled me how he could be such a good Christian and maintain his Catholic faith as well. It was hard for me to believe that a Catholic could actually be a Christian.

After college I went to medical school believing God wanted me to be a doctor and I married my high school sweetheart after my first year of medical school. We were going to church at the same place I had been taught as a teenager when we left the Catholic Church. I played guitar there and some mandolin during worship but was told that banjo music “didn't glorify the Lord.” For a long time I stopped practicing music since the leadership there felt I was making an idol of it. I desperately wanted to be obedient to God so I reluctantly obeyed the leadership and stopped pursuing my music for a time.

I started to recognize problems in this church when the two pastors had a falling out and a power struggle ensued. It turned out that one of the pastors was involved in immorality but was using spirituality as a smokescreen to defend himself. This led to a split in the church and as always happens when each party claims the Holy Spirit is telling them they are right but diametrically opposed to one another. After medical school we moved to a large city and joined another well-known independent charismatic church. Being a musician I once again became involved in the music ministry. Unfortunately, the pastor of this church had a falling out with the elders over a moral issue as well and a division ensued. We loved the people in the church and sided with the majority and stayed there for a time. There was true sense of christian community in this church that was genuine despite many cult-like features regarding membership requirements etc.

At this time my wife of three years was diagnosed with an extremely rare in-operable lung cancer. There were only thirty other recorded cases in the world's medical literature. She was told there was no cure but she may possibly remain without symptoms for an indeterminate amount of time before dying but it was uniformly fatal. We were bolstered by a loving group of folks who insists that God can heal if you only have enough faith. We embraced this theology wholeheartedly and pursued her healing for the next 8 years. We attended healing meetings, exorcisms, fasting and prayer and I began fasting Tuesday evenings to Thursday mornings for several years to obtain her healing from God.

Since we were both convinced my wife would be healed we decided to have children. We were blessed with two boys over the next four years. We coped with life by never talking about the possibility of her dying. We lived as if she would be healed. The problem with this was that it took an enormous amount of energy to muster this “faith talk” all the time and it was taking its toll on our marriage. Rather than confronting problems in our relationship, we would put them aside and continue to press for the healing. Seeking her healing became the focus of our lives and as a result we were in denial about all the other

problems that occur in any marriage, cancer notwithstanding. For me, it felt like a constant “sword of Damocles” hanging over my head for 8 of the 11 years we were married, but I could not tell my wife my true feelings. Most of my close friends were believing that her healing was forthcoming and I could not open up to them about how I really felt. This was one of the most intensely lonely and difficult periods in my life. I took solace in knowing that Christ would never leave me or forsake us despite the fact that we were truly walking in the Valley of the Shadow of Death. I could not share Scriptures with my wife or others about the valley of the shadow of death because it would be “doubting the healing.”

I started to secretly take comfort in the Scriptures that said “Not my will but thine” and God gave me His reassurance that He would be with us, whether Sue lived or died. I could not share this with her and instead would read aloud to her the Scriptures that said “By his stripes we are healed.” As protestants we had no anchor for our beliefs other than our own individual interpretation of the scriptures and when you are desperate, you hang on to any interpretation that will make you feel better, even if it is not true!

We were reading books and tracts about healing that was from an off-shoot of the charismatic movement called the “Faith Preachers”. Centered in Tulsa, Oklahoma, these teachers taught that Jesus heals everyone and if you don't get healed it must be your lack of faith. I realize now this actually was a twisted form of Christian Science and had its roots in one of the heresies dealt with by the early church. About 4 months before she died, I had a distinct impression that God was telling me that the time was very short and she would die soon. It may have just been my medical instincts seeing her become more irritable and short of breath. At this time she was taking huge amounts of over the counter ibuprofen to deal with the pain but would not admit that she was in pain. We long ago both agreed to not pursue any further diagnostic tests since they wouldn't “build our faith.” The actual words I heard in my mind were “the time is short now.” As strange as it sounds, this brought me some comfort since I felt that there was to be a conclusion to this torturous existence of denial we were living. I never shared this experience with her.

About 4 weeks before she died, she was becoming severely ill and short of breath. We heard of a missionary with a healing ministry that was flying in from Africa who had been known to raise people from the dead. Despite the worse ice and snow storm of that horrible winter of 93-94, I drove with her and my pastor in a van to Richmond Virginia so she could be healed. She believed God would heal her. We saw many tractor trailers jack-knifed and cars that had skidded off the road on the way down. It turned out that the healer couldn't come in due to the weather and we sadly drove all the way back taking almost two days for a six hour trip. At one point we were stuck in traffic for about 10 hours due to the storm. She was in absolute agony in the jostling van as we ran over potholes and ice on the highway. We stopped intermittently so I could give her injections of a powerful narcotic to relief her screams of agony.

Shortly after this trip, Sue did pass away leaving me with a 4 and 7 year old who did not even realize she was sick since we kept it from them. I was devastated knowing that our faith did not give her the peace that was promised. Not because God didn't make it

available, but we chose to mis-interpret the Scriptures. I knew even as she was dying, that this theology was wrong and it denied the ability for us to even have an honest conversation about her dying. No one could give me an answer for why she died if she had such faith and many from our church were devastated. The only words that gave me comfort in those days were from my old college friend Bernie, now a Roman Catholic priest. I will never forget when I asked Bernie why she had to suffer so much, and he said that Jesus gives us the privilege of sharing his suffering. Father Bernie told me that Jesus stretched his arms out on the cross and said, “ Sue, you come up with me and share my suffering.” Bernie then quoted St. Paul when he talked about completing in his body the suffering of Christ. I couldn't argue since it was Scripture and it was the only thing that gave me comfort in those difficult months after she died. I had never heard a Protestant talk about that verse and somehow missed it in all my years of intense personal Bible study.

Deb

The church that I was attending in NJ after graduating from college was also the church Russ and Sue had left a year before I got there. I heard about he and Sue and saw Russ perform at a Christian coffeehouse. When Sue was diagnosed with cancer, we prayed that she would be healed.

After a couple of years in the evangelical movement certain things started to bother me. First of all, I was repulsed by the materialism that was not discouraged by the church's leadership and secondly, there was a lack of concern for the poor. Finally, there seemed to be very little reverence for God because of the emphasis on friendship with Him.

The Catholic Church was attractive to me because of its teaching on social justice and the obvious reverence for God that had been lacking in my own experiences. I have always been a “morning person” and started attending morning Mass a couple of times during the week at a local parish. I felt very comfortable there and appreciated the reverence, but never thought of converting.

Around the age of twenty five, I made contact with my childhood friend, Renee, whom I had not spoken with for 6 or 7 years. When I told her that I became a born-again Christian she said “That's great!” As it happened, she converted to Catholicism and was a charismatic Catholic. We got together and had a great time of fellowship. During that meeting several things about her really impressed me. One was that she was planning on meeting a guy she was dating (who later became her husband) in New York City and they were going to bring peanut butter sandwiches to give to homeless people. Another thing was that she was very excited about Jesus and seemed to have a personal relationship with Him just like I did. Finally, when it was nearly time for her to leave I notice that a rosary came out of her pocket when she went to grab her keys. Immediately I thought, “How can she pray to Mary and still be close to God?” That was to be the question that would plague my thoughts for the next 10 years.

Around this time of my life, many of my friends from the young adult group started getting engaged. It seemed as if I would never get married and I began to get depressed

about it. When a new job opportunity opened up in western New Jersey, I thought it would be a good opportunity to start anew and move to Pennsylvania where the pace of life was slower and the cost of living was less.

My first dilemma in moving to a new city was finding a church. This is always a problem for evangelicals when they move because they have become accustomed to a certain pastor and a certain style of worship. I wanted to be sure that the church I chose had similar beliefs to the one I left. So I did what any sincere evangelical does, and I started asking around. Some of the folks at my church in NJ were very close to Russ and Sue. They told me to give them a call and see what church they were going to. When I called, Russ answered the phone. He was very nice and told me to go to New Covenant Christian Community because the church he and Sue went to was having problems with their pastor. In fact, they ended up coming to New Covenant Christian Community a year after I did.

My first few years at New Covenant were a good experience. I became friends with a young married couple who were like a big brother and sister to me. I immersed myself in the life of the church. I attended their family retreats, joined their liturgical dance team, attended and led Bible studies, taught Sunday school, made dinners for the sick, watched people's kids, and whatever else I could get involved in. It was a very fulfilling time for me. In general, I was happy at New Covenant and did not feel the need to look elsewhere for "more of God." When I did though, I always ended up at someplace "Catholic."

In Washington NJ, I often stopped at the Blue Army Shrine on my way back and forth to meetings for work. I would walk around the grounds and walk through the wooded paths looking at statues which told the story of Jesus earthly life. Sometimes I would even walk through the Stations of the Cross or look at the plaques portraying the mysteries of the Rosary. I did not know what it was all about but I felt close to God when I was there so I continued to come back. One day when I went, they were having a Mass. I peaked in at the people inside and saw a young Blue Army nun. She looked so in love with the Lord and so devout as she prayed the Mass. I desperately wanted to talk to her. When she finally came outside where I was standing I started to talk to her. I don't remember what I said to her but I do remember her telling me that she experienced a deep closeness to Jesus since she consecrated her life to Mary. I did not know what it meant to be consecrated to Mary, but I did know that this woman, just like my friend Renee, prayed to Mary and they both loved Jesus.

This truth confounded me as I drove home from the shrine. During that time, I was having an emotional struggle regarding a potential dating relationship. No matter what I did, I could not seem to find any peace regarding it. So right then and there, in my car on the way home from the Blue Army Shrine, I prayed to Mary. I said, "Mary, you are a woman. You know what it's like to struggle with these feelings, please help me." Then I of course apologized to Jesus if I was doing anything that was idolatrous. After that prayer, I began to have peace about the situation. In fact from then on, I never struggled again with that particular issue.

Though I was basically happy at New Covenant and believed that I was growing in my relationship with God, two things continued to bother me. One was that since we did not celebrate the liturgical year, there was no preparation for Easter. So, on one or two Good Fridays, I attended Mass. The other was that communion was only celebrated once a month and was not a very reverent or fulfilling experience. In fact, one month the church had a procession of clowns (from the clown ministry) officiating at the communion service. It was this and other un-orthodox practices that made me question whether this was the church Jesus had intended.

The year that Sue (Russ's late wife) began to get very ill was a sad one for the whole church. Everyone loved her and was praying for her healing. I began having very intense times of prayer even in the middle of the night, especially during the week of her death. I had a friendly relationship with her and Russ. Sue and I were on the dance team together; I babysat their boys and taught them Sunday school. I also went to Russ seeking medical treatment for a neck injury from a car accident several years before.

After she passed away, I prayed often for Russ and his boys. In fact, the last three years of my single life were probably the most intense in terms of my relationship with God. I had a sense that He was with me every moment as a friend and confidant. I read the Bible and prayed whenever I had the chance. However, I wanted to be married very badly, and as I approached my 30's I was afraid of growing old alone.

When Russ started courting me after Sue died, I was very excited. Many signs pointed to him being the one for whom I had waited for all these years. We both loved God more than anything, but because of our different religious experiences, personalities, and interpretations of the Bible, we tended to clash on spiritual matters. Even though we were both Protestant, his spirituality was very different than mine and was a constant source of friction in our relationship. Even though we attended the same charismatic-type churches I never realized he didn't completely accept all the charismatic teachings.

After we got married, these differences intensified. We found ourselves arguing about matters of faith more than any other subject. The other disturbing thing that happened was that almost from the day we got married, I no longer felt God's presence as I had when I was single. The intense feelings I had experienced for so many years and especially for the last three years before getting married, were completely gone. This led to a severe crisis of faith on my part. I thought that God no longer loved me. My faith that I thought was so mature was really only based on feelings and when those feelings were gone, I felt lost and abandoned. This loss of feeling for God caused me to delve even more deeply into charismatic activities like retreats and revival meetings. The more I did this however, the more of a wedge it drove between Russ and I. Not only that, the activities like prayer, praise, and Bible reading which always gave me fulfillment in the past were not doing a thing for me as they had in the past.

It was a dark time in our marriage and in my spiritual life. The only thing that kept me hanging on was Russ's consoling words "Just because you don't feel God doesn't mean that He's not with you." As I observed Russ's faith, I began to appreciate him more and

more for he told me that he had not been “emotionally touched” by God in over 20 years and yet his faith was as strong or stronger than any charismatic evangelical I had seen.

Being the wife of a busy internist in solo practice and mother of his two young sons was not a role I adjusted to easily. None of my usual coping methods worked. I became very depressed in the first year or two of our marriage. After about the third year, I began to think of the situation a little more rationally. I remember thinking how strange it was that I found it so difficult to be in this new role and yet people were living in war zones and not complaining. I began to wonder about how people of long ago coped with problems and somehow made it. I also started reading more about Mother Theresa. One day I thought, “I need something to help me through each day.” I remembered that the Catholics had Mass every day and so I decided to go. Russ had no problem with it so I went. After my first Mass, I was hooked. Something about it was very comforting to me. One night when the priest prayed the prayer of consecration and held up the Host, I thought “What if it's really true? What if the bread and wine really does become the Body and Blood of Jesus? I went home and posed the question to Russ. He said “I believe that it is true.”

I wish that I could say that from that day on we returned to the Church, but we both had a lot to work through before that would happen. However, that experience was a turning point for me and it set me on my journey home to the Catholic Church.

Our Journey Home

Russ

Deborah and I were married in May 1995. She proved to be a wonderful mother and wife. However, we had on-going arguments about religion and matters of faith. I was slowly moving away from charismatic faith teaching theology but she was pursuing full-tilt these doctrines that I now held suspect. This was a time in the early 90's when the “Toronto Blessing” was sweeping the world and our church was having renewal meetings. People would be asked if they wanted “more of God” and would fall to the floor laughing or unconscious as evidence of receiving God's blessing. People must have thought I didn't want “more of God” enough to fall on the floor and laugh uncontrollably. My wife attended all of these meetings and I chose not to participate since the evidence of God's blessing was an emotional outpouring which I had not experience in over 20 years since my conversion. This strained our marriage, as well-meaning folks in the church would ask Deborah what was wrong with me. I had become a firm believer in not basing my relationship with God on my emotions since I had been schooled in pain and suffering for the past 10 years of my previous marriage. I knew from personal experience that God was with me regardless of how I felt. Unfortunately at the time, the pastor was teaching that if God didn't engage our emotions, then something was wrong with us spiritually. Deborah felt that perhaps I didn't want more of God due to my failure to embrace this renewal.

The stresses of becoming a new mother and wife were difficult for Deborah and her practice of worship and praise was no longer working to give her peace. In the past, we

were taught that we should just “forget about your cares and worship Christ” as the answer to your problems. Deborah stated reading about suffering from Mother Theresa and Theresa Liseux and the Catholic mystics. This led her to find comfort in Catholic teaching and she was slowly being drawn away from our evangelical charismatic faith. For the first time in her life, she started to understand the value of pain and suffering in the world and in the context of her own life. The Catholic Church teaching brought her much comfort in these difficult times. As much as I was happy that she was leaving the emotionalism of the charismatic church, I was troubled that it took Catholicism to give her true peace. This was the peak of the priest sex-abuse scandals and I wanted nothing to do with the Church. I thought that Christ could not possibly be the head of a church with sex abusers and pedophiles.

Realizing now that neither Deborah nor I embraced our former theology we decided to leave the charismatic church we had been in for almost 10 years and joined a more main-line Methodist/Evangelical church. I loved the more formal nature of it and didn't miss the spontaneous prophecies and emotionalism that was so much a part of our past experience. At times our old church had a carnival-like atmosphere and the height of enthusiasm during worship was the litmus test for whether or not God showed up. There were times when the musician/worship leader would become discouraged if he could not stir the congregants into a religious fervor. I had seen over the years how spiritual devotion and enthusiasm without authority is a recipe for error. I was thankful that this type of behavior did not occur in this more mainline Methodist church. I enjoyed the preaching style of the pastor and the more subdued worship services. I saw how this church expressed their love for the Lord by performing acts of service to the poor and the community rather than “wearing it on their shirtsleeves” with what I felt were emotional outbursts.

All this time Deborah started to attend Mass secretly and wanted to join the Catholic Church but I felt that it would be too confusing for our children. I couldn't argue however that it was slowly changing our marriage for the better as we both embraced trials in our life as a tool for good and not something to avoid and deny. I still was very reticent about Catholicism based on my past experiences and did not even consider joining the church. I asked Deborah for the sake of unity in our marriage to stop pursuing Catholicism and she agreed to stop going to Mass.

A few more years went by and I began to long for a more simple life. My 60-70 hour a week medical practice was grinding me into the ground and I no longer had any joy in my life. A few years earlier I had started to go on short-term mission trips to Haiti and this was causing me to re-think how we were living. We both decided to simplify our lives and I left my practice and sold our suburban home and moved to a much smaller home in a different town. Some of the literature we were reading about the philosophy of voluntary simplicity was Catholic and I found it intriguing. Our kids, now teenagers, thought we were crazy but were excited about the move closer to their school friends. I promised them to ease the pain of moving into a smaller house, I would subscribe to cable TV, which I had never wanted to do before.

Around this time my mother passed away rather suddenly after breaking her hip. My brother, now an associate pastor in my former charismatic church, and I had to go through her belongings and settle her estate. As we went through her night table, we found rosary beads and her Catholic Mass book and prayer books. He was going to toss them in the trash pile when I suddenly said, "what if Mom was right all along and the Catholic Church is the true Church?" He said "nah, don't worry Russ, no chance." I did bring those items home for Deborah since I knew she was Catholic at heart now. Even then, something started to stir in me as I carefully removed the beautiful wooden crucifix my parents always had on their wall above their bed and took it home. I realized that for all the contradiction and pain in their lives, their Catholic faith was more important to them than I realized. That beautiful crucifix now hangs on the wall above our bed.

Deborah continued to long for Mass and I agreed to let her go to Mass as long as she would come with me to church on Sunday morning with the boys. Now that we had cable TV, she would often watch EWTN (a Catholic Network) and the "Journey Home Program." After seeing some of the conversion stories, I started to ask Deborah to get me Catholic conversion stories of Marcus Grodi, Scott Hahn and others. Deborah had attempted to show me a Scott Hahn video a few years before this but I found it too dry and Catholic! This time it was as if the veil had been lifted from my eyes and I couldn't put these books down. I read Karl Keating's book *Catholicism and Fundamentalism* and Steve Ray's *Crossing the Tiber*. When I read for the first time that it was the Catholic Church that canonized the Bible, that did it for me! I was now very angry that I had been mis-informed for so long by anti-Catholic Protestants and I started to feel remorse for walking away from the Church without ever learning any of its true teachings. I also was angry that I had never met a Catholic in thirty years who could give me these basic true facts about the Catholic Church. I was embarrassed that as a relatively bright person with the ability to obtain a medical degree, I had never considered reading history and instead based my understanding of Church history from a 16-year-old "Bible Scholar" thirty years earlier. How could I be "so smart" and yet be so close-minded about something so important as my faith?

Suddenly, all the troublesome verses I didn't understand as a Protestant came alive with richness and meaning. I realized the Catholics take the Bible more literally than the evangelicals ever had. I always wondered how we got around John 6 when Jesus told us to "eat his body." Protestants insisted it was symbolic but the early church I found out believed that Christ truly became present at the Communion Table. Paul's description in Corinthians also made it clear to me that the Church believed in the real presence of Christ in the breaking of the bread. I also discovered that the horrible suffering of my first wife's premature death was not in vain and as a Catholic it actually had meaning. The paradox of Christians who said "the sinner's prayer" and continued to actively live sinful lives always bothered me, but Catholic theology made it clear that our earthly performance was important for salvation, but not the basis for it, as I had wrongly been taught they believed. This was further brought home to me when I now re-read Matthew 25 and realized that Christ himself said the only difference between the sheep (heaven-bound) and the goats (hell-bound) was what they did or didn't do! I now realized that after 30 years of Bible study, the sinner's prayer wasn't mentioned in the Scriptures as

the “formula for salvation.” The concept of venial and mortal sins made a lot of sense to me. How could a “white lie” really have the same temporal and eternal consequences as murder? That always bothered me. The concept of the Communion of Saints which is in the Creed of Catholic and Protestants alike also became meaningful to me for the first time in my life. I had the almost palpable impression that my Mom who had died a year earlier was interceding for me and praying me back to the Church. The Catholic Church has always taught that when a person dies they can continue to pray for those left behind, and since the “fervent effectual prayers of a righteous man availeth much” how much more now that they are in heaven beholding the face of God!

The Methodist church we were attending bought an entire theatre of tickets to see the first screening of Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*. In the middle of the movie as tears streamed down my face, I knew I had to come home to the church as I graphically saw His love for me displayed. If He could do this for me, I could overcome my pride and reticence about the Catholic Church and return in obedience to Him.

Deborah and I started counseling with a local parish priest who led us back to the Catholic Church. At my first confession in over 35 years, tears started to fall as I heard those sweet words of absolution as if they were spoken from Christ himself. Deborah and I then made our marriage vows before the Church and together we received Christ in the Eucharist. Jesus was saying to me “You have found what you have always been looking for and I am right here with you.” As I knelt and prayed after receiving Him, I knew that I could never be closer to Him in this life than I was right then. The frustration of all those years of searching for Him and trying to find him outside of His church was over.

Despite my lack of emotionalism, I have cried more tears of joy in the past year than in 32 years of charismatic church life! I often choke up telling others about Christ in the Eucharist and often become teary-eyed thinking about how kind He is to have brought us back to His Church. My wife and I have experienced a spiritual oneness in our marriage that can only be described as supernatural. Before, we were always on opposite pages regarding spiritual issues and now not only are we on the same page; we can't stop turning the pages together! I often chastise myself for leaving the Church as a young person but I am thankful for those years away because they prepared me to appreciate the Church and the Sacraments that Christ gave us in His Body!

My heart aches for my ex-Catholic brothers and sisters who like me had left the truth of the Catholic Church. The charismatic Christians I have been privileged to know over the years have a devotion and love for God that is truly amazing. I believe if they could only see the tremendous gift of His Real Presence in His Church they would fall on their face before Him in the Eucharist. This could ignite a revival, the likes of which have not been seen for years. Their insatiable hunger for the presence of Christ could finally be completely satisfied on a daily basis in receiving him in the Eucharist. Father Benedict Groeschel of the Franciscan Friars of the Renewal has said that the many church ladies from Black Pentecostal churches in the Bronx come to Eucharistic Adoration because they know their “sweet Lord Jesus” is there and I know my brethren would do the same if they knew.

Deb

Now that I began to believe in the Eucharist, I decided to start reading more about the Catholic Church. I knew they had a Catholic section in a local Christian bookstore. This time however, instead of walking past the Catholic section with my eyes averted, I went right to it. The bookstore owner showed me a couple of books written by Protestant converts. Once I started to read and listen to their stories, I was flabbergasted! I realized that I could not argue with the historical and Biblical evidence that the Catholic Church was the Church Jesus founded. One week while Russ was on a medical mission in Haiti, I remember sitting in my car listening to Catholic re-vert Jeff Cavins talk about the Eucharist. All at once, it hit me that for 15 years I had been crying out for more of Jesus. I had gone to countless conferences, Bible studies, and worship and revival services. My entire life was focused on getting closer to God and all that time, He was waiting for me in the Tabernacle. All that time I could have been receiving the Lord of the Universe into my own body united with Him more intimately than I could have ever imagined. When this realization hit, all I could do was weep. I wept for the years that were wasted without Him. I wept with anger at the Protestants who dragged me away from Him and the Catholics who never told me He was there! I wept with fear about never being able to go back to Him because of leaving His church and fear of losing friends and family if I did. I think I cried for two months in every Mass and Catholic Church I visited.

The hurdle of believing in the Eucharist was a major one, but there was so much more about the Church that I did not yet understand. I read everything I could get my hands on but this pursuit became an obsession and made Russ increasingly uncomfortable. Eventually, it began to divide us and so I started to “go underground.” I would go to Mass without telling him and talk to priests about how to come back to the Church. One priest told me that all I had to do was go to confession which was actually untrue because our marriage had not been convalidated. Without telling Russ, I went to confession and received the Eucharist. When I did tell him the next day, he was extremely hurt. This action on my part almost destroyed our marriage. In Protestant marriages, the doctrine of submission is heavily emphasized and my receiving the Eucharist without having his approval was equivalent to spiritual mutiny of household.

I began to talk to my Catholic friend Renee about the problem, and she gave me the best advice I could have ever gotten. She said “God does not want you to get divorced, submit to your husband.” So, that's what I did. I told Russ that our marriage was more important to me than being Catholic and that I would stop reading, put away my Catholic books and submit to him. I was so confused anyway and I had no one to talk to except Renee. After that, our marriage was transformed. We found that we were able to talk more about spiritual things, and eventually decided that New Covenant Christian Community, the church that Sue died in, the church that we were married in, and where all of our friends were, was not the best place for us. It was a hard decision, but we knew that it was the best one for our marriage and family.

Our next move was to a Methodist church. We spent 5 years there and it was a good transition time. We talked about Catholicism and Protestantism. We discussed what it

means to be a Christian. We also talked a lot about the meaning of suffering because that, purgatory, the Eucharist, and the nagging feeling that the Catholic Church was the true Church were the four things I could not shake from my new belief system. I knew for sure that whatever happened, I could never go back to the Protestant view of suffering which basically says “deny it, ignore it and work hard at praising God in order to pretend it isn't there.” I was learning to “offer it up” and this was the most freeing experience of my married life. When I began to think of serving my family as serving Jesus and offer the trials of this life for their salvation, I started to experience joy in marriage and motherhood that I had never known before.

After about a year of attending the Methodist church, Russ decided to leave his full-time practice of medicine. I was all for this because it meant selling our big house, and having him home a lot more. When we moved, we decided to subscribe to cable TV for the first time in our 7 year marriage. After we did so, I began watching EWTN pretty regularly. Soon I had the desire to go to Mass again but this time I was very open with Russ about my struggles.

A year and a half ago I woke up one morning and said “I want to start attending morning Mass at St. Ann's.” He was concerned that it might confuse the children but I assured him that they did not have to know. I would go after they went to school in the morning. The feeling I had going back to Mass after 5 years was so peaceful. By now I was confident that the Catholic Church was where God wanted me and He would help me to be in full communion with Her in His perfect timing. For the first three months of attending daily Mass and praying the Rosary, I did not say anything to the boys. They did notice that I watched EWTN regularly and would ask me if I was Catholic. On Christmas Eve 2003, we went to the Methodist church as usual. On Christmas morning we woke up and opened our gifts. I made breakfast for the family and we had about an hour and 1/2 before we needed to go to see our relatives. I said to Russ and the boys, “I think I'll go to Mass at St. Ann's.” The boys looked at Russ and he said “OK,” and so I went. After that I went to Mass on Sundays after attending the Methodist church with Russ and the boys. I liked the Methodist church less and less because it was becoming like a multi-media entertainment experience on Sundays. They always had a movie or a skit and some props. One Sunday they had Jesus face stamped on a baseball card projected on a huge screen in the middle of the sanctuary. On it, was written MVP (Most Valuable Player) after that I was not sure how much longer I could continue going to that church and was longing to receive the Eucharist.

In the mean time, Russ and I had seen the movie “The Passion.” He had started watching The Journey Home with me, and I was praying the Rosary every day. The Sunday after the MVP incident, we were running late for church. The boys were not getting out of bed and Russ asked me “What time is Mass?” The next thing I knew we were walking hand in hand toward St. Ann's on our way to Sunday Mass together! After that Sunday, we never went back to the Methodist church. Russ started reading all the literature I had read 5 years earlier and had a profound conversion.

We began meeting with a priest and had our marriage con-validated on April 30th, 2004. Now we spend our days going to Mass together and talking about the beauty of this Church we left so long ago and never experienced the grace of God in. We study Church history, doctrine, and the Protestant Reformation from a Catholic perspective. We marvel at the way the Sacraments have changed our lives and transformed our marriage. If only we knew then what we know now, we never would have left His Church!

“Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit, as it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be, world without end, Amen.”