

## Walt's Story

I'm not sure how earth-shattering or dramatic my journey has been. To me, it hasn't been either - it's simply been the way that the Lord has directed me to travel. And I have traveled this road and expect to for the rest of my days. It hasn't always been easy, and it hasn't always been fun. But I wouldn't trade my faith or my love for the Lord, or this journey that I'm on for His sake, for anything. I was brought up in the Episcopal church, was baptized there, and was confirmed there. Until I was about 17 years old, it was my home. I also, however, had a Russian paternal grandmother who was an Orthodox believer, and she made her feelings about the Catholic Church clear during my early life. Consequently, it shaped how I saw Catholicism and Catholics; I, quite truthfully, was afraid. Afraid that Catholics were not Christians, and that their body of faith was evil. So I stayed where I was for all of those years. The irony was that, in hindsight, I believe God was calling me, even as a young boy, to the Catholic faith. He was calling me home. And I didn't want to listen. It's funny - in my recollections of going into a Catholic church for any reason when I was younger, I always felt like I was going home. That's something that I know most people who convert and give themselves to Jesus and to Mary through the Sacraments also realize. I believe that is where the Lord can get into our hearts most effectively. Anyway.....

I gave up on my faith not too long before I graduated from High School in 1980. It was then that I entered the U.S. Marine Corps and started into a life that, at least in part, I follow parts of today. I learned about self-discipline, good work habits, and what it means to not give up on anyone. These are things that I've been able to apply to my faith with relative ease..... One thing that happened, however, was that my antipathy towards any faith grew pretty steadily. The reason is that I met a large number of fundamentalist Christians, mostly Southern Baptists and members of the Assemblies of God, who in my opinion are extremely harsh and judgemental - certainly not what one would expect of those who profess belief in the Resurrection of Our Lord and the love that He taught that we all should have for others.

Because of the influence of some of these people, and the attitude that I felt from them, which was a sort of "body count" mentality, I was especially put off. I remember thinking, "if these people are Christians, I don't want to be one." I didn't want to know what they believed, or hear what they taught. I was, very simply, turned off. I became a, for lack of better choice of word, heathen. I had this attitude for a number of years. It stuck with me after I left the Corps, and one of its side effects was this horrible feeling of emptiness that I carried with me all of the time. I couldn't identify it, and I didn't associate it with the absence of God in my own life. I just knew that something was very wrong with me. That all started to change back in 1989 - it was at that point that God found a way to penetrate my self-made shell. There is a Catholic college not too far from where I live that is conducted by a community of Benedictine monks, and I was invited to a wedding at the Abbey Church there. I got to the campus and couldn't believe how lovely the grounds were. This place was practically in my back yard, and I had never been there! The wedding was beautiful, and I didn't realize that it was complete with a Nuptial Mass, which

really overwhelmed me.,,,, It was not too long after that wedding that I started to visit the college grounds frequently, simply to walk around the campus and to experience this wonderful peace that I had never felt before. During one of my visits I spotted a figure in a black habit walking towards me from a bit of a distance, and I remember thinking then that I shouldn't be there and this person was going to tell me to leave. However, nothing could have been further from the truth!

He was, and is, Fr. Michael, now the oldest monk in their community. At the time he was 81 or 82, and now he is approaching 90. This man, this priest, showed me such incredible friendliness and kindness during my talk with him (and he walked me into the ground at that time, too! :), that he had left an indelible mark on my heart. I firmly believe that the Lord God put us in each others paths - him to teach me a lesson, and me to learn it. Not a lesson of the mind, but a lesson of the heart. Since then I've had many encounters with these monks. Their influence on me has been profound; not only have I gotten to see them as brothers in Christ, but a few of them have become personal friends, and one of them is my confessor. Each and every one, human as they may be, truly embody who the Lord wants us to be. None of these monks would say that they are extraordinary people, and that my indeed be true. But their faith and the love they share with those in need is a true gift to us all.

I finally took the step of formally entering the Faith in 1997, thanks to the influence of my son. It was after yet another wedding, and both of my children have always attended a Catholic school, even though they were not in the Faith. This particular wedding was another Nuptial Mass, and my son, who was 7 at the time (he is now 11), couldn't understand why he couldn't have the Eucharist, or why I didn't go, either. When I explained to him that because we weren't Catholic we couldn't receive Jesus, he was momentarily stunned. But his response to that was, "well, Daddy, I want to be able to receive Jesus, and you should too, because it's lonely here without Him." The words of a small child. Simple enough to be spoken by him, and powerful enough to know that they were a command from God. Consequently, I and my then wife started taking our children to Mass the following Sunday, and within about two weeks were attending RCIA classes in the parish we subsequently joined. We became members of the Body of Christ at the Easter Vigil 1998. For me, it was the best thing I have ever done. I have the Peace of Christ in my heart, and I know He is always with me. And I know I can always speak with His Mother whenever I need Her help. In February of 2000, my wife and I divorced. The circumstances are too painful to recount here, and all I will say is that it had to happen. Sometimes when we learn the truth about something, the consequences can be extremely painful. This is what happened to me. But the Lord \*is\* my Shepherd, and I learned in the most basic of ways how much He loves me. He carried me throughout all of what I had to deal with, and is carrying me now, over a year later.

Pax Vobiscum.

Walt

