

## Michelle T.'s Story

Somehow I always knew God even though I was the child of Athiests that did not allow me to attend church or read the Bible. Yet somehow I always knew God and I knew "The Lady" ( who I later found out was the Blessed Virgin Mary.)

When I left home and joined the Navy I started to search for God but I didn't understand how important it was to attend church and I didn't realize what a treasure the Bible was for a long time. I was stationed in Sicily, Italy where I visited beautiful Cathedrals and Churches and was surrounded by the Catholic Faith. I visited the shrine of Saint Agatha and several other Saints over the course of three years and I was inspired by their devotion to their faith and their willingness to die rather than denounce God. I became very interested in the Saints and I would read their stories and admire their holiness and courage. I tell everyone that it was the Saints that led me into the Church because once I discovered them I could tell that they were with me and praying for me as I started my journey.

I started to study the Bible and I learned how to pray the Rosary but I wasn't a Christian yet and when I left Italy and moved back to the United States I started to go to a very nice non-Denominational church with my Baptist boyfriend. I was convinced that I wanted to be a Christian at this point and I confided to some Elders of this church that I didn't understand certain key things like why Jesus died for me and how I could become saved. They were very kind and spent several days each week meeting with me and going over everything with me. We would sit down with our Bibles and study scripture together after a friendly dinner and some fellowship. (I was very poor and they always showed me such mercy and charity without making me feel bad.) I loved these Bible study times and I always looked forward to going to church on Sundays. I quickly became a Christian and embraced Jesus, the Bible, and the salvation message that was being preached to me.

But after a while something started to bother me. I came into Christianity without any previous Bible knowledge so I had a fresh and open mind. I didn't have any pre-conceived notions about anything Christian so maybe that's why I was able to see what others didn't seem to notice. Whenever we would gather together as a group or one-on-one for Bible study I started to pick up on the fact that even though my brothers and sisters in Christ had good holy hearts they would twist the simple words of scripture to fit their theology. At first I tried to deny this but it became an obvious fact. I began to wonder if this was the right thing to do. Were Christians supposed to gloss over some passages, ignore others, and add meaning to verses that clearly taught something different then what was being preached? When we discussed Mathew 16:18 (And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.) everyone told me that Jesus wasn't talking about building His church on Peter but that the rock He was talking about was Peter's faith. I was confused because it seemed to me that Jesus was speaking to Peter and about Peter when He said, "You are Peter and upon this

rock I will build my church." I was told that no, the rock was Peter's faith and that what he had said two verses prior was the rock that Jesus was going to build His church on. (15: He said to them, "But who do you say that I am? 16: Simon Peter replied, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.")

Later that night when I had returned home I sat down and studied these verses in context with the rest of Matthew 16. Once again I read over the words we had studied: 13: Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do men say that the Son of man is?" 14: And they said, "Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." 15: He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" 16: Simon Peter replied, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." ... 18 And I say also to you, That you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.

No matter how hard I tried, I could not make that verse mean something that it did not mean. I could not force myself to accept that Jesus was speaking about Peter's faith instead of Peter himself. I began to wonder why I was so hung up on this verse and why I couldn't just submit and accept my friends' interpretation. I didn't realize then that this wouldn't be the last time that I'd come across scripture verses that made perfect sense until my Christian friends imposed their own interpretation over them. When I read the Bread of Life Discourse (John 6) I clearly saw that Jesus was teaching that His flesh was food and His blood was drink and that in order to have life in us we were to drink His blood and eat His flesh. I had no idea how I was supposed to do this, but I knew that this was what Jesus was telling me. However, when I went to my Christian friends and asked them how I could eat Christ's flesh and drink Christ's blood they sat down with me and carefully went over John 6 and told me it was all symbolic. How could that be? I wondered. How could anyone ignore such point-blank verses like "Amen, amen, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you do not have life within you. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him on the last day. For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me and I in him. Just as the living Father sent me and I have life because of the Father, so also the one who feeds on me will have life because of me." (John 6:53-58)

I began to wonder about the way my Christian friends studied the Bible. I started to realize that they really did twist verses so that the scriptures would fit into their own personal theology. This began to make me worry.

I became incredibly frustrated when my Christian friends could not answer any of my difficult questions. I would ask, "How do I know that the Bible is truly inspired and that all of the books in the Bible are supposed to be there?" or, "Can I lose my salvation by sinning?" among other difficult questions. To each one of these I was given a few quick Biblical one-liners that didn't always match the question and then told to pray to the Holy Spirit for guidance. I began to become disillusioned after a couple of months of serious study when I realized that there were

thousands of different protestant denominations each preaching a slightly different version of Christianity, each interpreting key Bible passages differently, and each claiming to be led by the Holy Spirit. How could this be, I wondered. How could the Holy Spirit lead everyone into such confusion and difference if we were all called to be one in Christ? Which church was the real church founded by Christ? Which interpretation of the Bible was the correct interpretation? Where was the Truth being taught? Above all, how would I ever know any of this for sure? Just praying to the Holy Spirit and then interpreting scripture on my own didn't work. Something was wrong.

I began to get scared.

I started to ask my Christian friends about Christian history and I was told that the church had become corrupt by the year 300 and that a "Golden Thread" of pure Christians had gone underground and preserved the faith. (Yet the Bible taught that Jesus was always with the church and that the Gates of Hell would not prevail...) When the reformation came about the Golden Thread was free to resurface and throw off the chains of Catholicism. But no matter how hard I tried I could not find any proof that this "Golden Thread" existed. Wouldn't these Christians have written something or painted on hidden walls like the persecuted Catholics had done? How come all I could find was Catholic Christian history and not one ounce of proof that supported the Golden Thread theory? The Catholics had gone underground and yet they still managed to write and to produce art that showed us they had been around. I also discovered that the Bible had been put together by the Catholic Church during two councils: Carthage, around 397 and Hippo, around 419. The seven books that the Catholics had supposedly added to the Bible during the Council of Trent in the 1500's had actually been in the Bible all along - and Martin Luther removed those 7 books when he broke away from the Church and started his own version of Christianity. All of a sudden I realized that I wasn't being told the whole truth even though my Christian friends were beautiful and holy people. After some tense conversations and desperate final questions I broke away from my non-Denominational church and hovered in limbo while I decided what to do.

That's when I met some Catholics.

At first I was terrified of the Catholic Church because I had been constantly told that Catholics tried to earn their way to heaven through good works, that they didn't read the Bible, that Catholics worshipped Mary, and disobeyed very blatant commands that could easily be found in Scripture. They had statues even though God told them not to have statues. They prayed vain repetitive prayers even though Jesus had warned against such things. Above all, they worshipped bread and believed that it was God.

Since I was lost and confused I figured that I might as well investigate the Catholic faith. After all, hadn't I been surrounded by the Catholic Faith in Italy? Didn't I love it and admire it then?

What had caused me to become so suspicious? I decided to throw my preconceived notions aside and seek with an open heart. I wasn't disappointed!

Michelle T.