

Patty Bonds' Story

It was late September, 2000. I sat at my computer under the dim light of my desk lamp. My family was asleep. I was alone with God and the realization that I was about to bring my life, as I had known it, to a sudden and complete end. I had prayed for the right words with the right spirit to explain briefly to a large number of my friends what had transpired over the last six months. The letter read . . .

Dear Friends,

Gen. 12:1 - 4a "Now the Lord said to Abram, 'Go forth from your country, and from your relatives and from your father's house, to the land which I will show you;' so Abram went forth as the Lord had spoken to him."

I understand in a new way how Abram must have felt when God came along and told him that life was about to change drastically. It is a very difficult thing to walk away from everything that has been familiar and comforting to you and to follow God into unknown territory, alone, with His words echoing in your ears and His guiding hand in yours. This is where I have been for several months now, and the time has come to make it known to all of you.

For the past six months I have been studying the Catholic faith. I have found that "to be deep in history is to cease to be Protestant." (J. H. Newman) The discoveries I have made have been so amazing and such a surprise to me. It had been the most difficult, painful, confusing, enlightening, exciting, glorious six months of my life. If I had not had the previous five years of walking closely with God, learning to hear His voice and respond in obedience even when it hurts, and learning that discipleship means death to self and every form of strength and comfort outside of Him, I would never have been able to recognize His leading and follow Him down this path. Jn. 10:27

I am thankful for all of you at NCC and those friends from other churches who have been my friends and faith family. I love you all and hope that we can remain close. I will not be severing relationships. If this occurs it will have to be the choice of others. I will not engage in arguments. I have watched too many of those, and have come to the firm belief that such arguments and debates grieve the Lord.

I am attending church and classes at St. Helen's Parish in Glendale. I have resigned from Northwest Community Church. My husband and family are supportive of this decision. They presently wish to remain at NCC, and I may be coming with them at times, but St. Helen's is my

church home now.

God bless you all.

In Christ,
Patty Bonds

I had read it over, prayed over it, read it over again. Now I sat silently with my heart beating rapidly and my hand trembling on the mouse. I asked God for His strength and comfort as I clicked "Send". I watched as my computer processed my request and the "Message Sent" indicator appeared on the screen. "There goes my life, Lord. There goes my family, my reputation, my ministry, my identity, and more than likely my friends. For all I know, this may cost me my marriage. I need you Lord. Hold me close."

I had been raised in a Baptist family. I am the daughter of a Baptist Pastor and the older sister of Protestant apologist and anti-Catholic, Dr. James White. We were a very sola scriptura sort of family. On Sundays we had fried chicken, mashed potatoes, and doctrine for lunch. My father was my pastor most of my life. As my brother grew and progressed through his education, I saw him as a great spiritual and biblical authority. I had learned about the teachings of Calvin from him. We had grown in our Calvinistic interpretation of scripture together. (I mention all these things to demonstrate that I had to cross the Tiber at its widest point.)

With the exception of having known some very godly Catholics here and there in my life, I was quite convinced that the Catholic Church was wrong, very wrong. I was convinced no truly "born again" Christian could be or remain a Catholic. I believed Catholicism was not Christian, it was pagan idolatry. I had even managed to raise my children with a strong anti-Catholic bias. (For which I repent in sorrow.)

In 1995, God began to move in my life in a mighty way. I had experienced some things as a child that had scared my life and my faith, and God was beginning the process of healing those scars and revealing Himself to me as I was willing to obey. I developed a deep and wonderful relationship with God. I became aware of His presence and I learned to follow His promptings. My obedience brought true intimacy with God. I learned that being a disciple of Christ meant following Him wherever He led no matter what the cost.

God slowly began to change some of my theological stands. I began to realize that faith alone had not changed my life, but rather faith which brought about obedience and action. As Jn 14:21 states, He reveals Himself to us as we obey and as we follow. The idea of faith alone no longer seemed to be enough. My relationship with God was not solely a matter of believing in Him, it

was a matter of unconditional surrender and undisputed obedience. (James 2:21) It was being crucified with Christ and living the Christ life. (Gal. 2:20) The result of that obedience was an intimate, loving, living, Father-daughter relationship.

(The change in my walk with God was so dramatic, I actually felt that I had been "born again" at that point. So I did what any evangelical Christian does when they believe they have been born again. I was baptized. There were many re-baptisms at my former church. It is a common experience among Protestants to attempt to identify the exact date of their conversion to Christ. For some, that is not an easy task. They realize that they "grew" into their faith. For me, my belief in the basic tenants of the gospel message began in early childhood and were followed by Baptism at the age of six. My life was marked by milestones of progress in my faith. I had attempted more than once to identify that "point in time" conversion. I had even heard evangelists urge people who cannot identify the point in which they came to faith in Christ, to pray a "just in case" kind of sinners prayer and mark the date as the day they were born again. This frantic search for a date is actually real struggle for some people. During my studies of the Catholic faith, I learned that conversion is a life long process. My life as a child of God began at my baptism, and has progressed through stages of growth and response to new challenges and new understanding. My conversion to the Catholic faith has laid to rest the question of when I became a Christian, and has helped me understand the workings of God throughout my life.)

I was dealing with a discipleship organization during this time that used some rather unique methods to deal with the life of faith. For one thing, they used confessors. These were people who were older and more mature in the faith that walked with you one on one and shared your life experiences. They were also witnesses when you prayed for forgiveness of your sins. The founders of this method were not sure why this method had produced such amazing results. They didn't feel they had found any strong biblical backing for the practice. In fact, they sometimes were attacked for being too "Catholic" in this approach. They used James 5:16 as their proof text, but they admitted that they had discovered the practice just by practical experience. (Of course later I learned that the practice was God's idea and His commission to His apostles the sacrament of reconciliation. Jn 20:21-23) It would seem the closer we are to the truth God gave us, the greater the grace we experience.

Then the bomb dropped. That is my description of it anyway. March 11th 2000, my daughter and I went to the St. Patrick's Day Parade because we had been researching our Scottish and Irish roots. When I came home I decided to do some research and find out what the truth was about this person called St. Patrick. I found some writings of his on the Internet and I will never forget the impact they had on me. I realized I had found a brother. This Catholic Bishop knew my Lord the way I did. But how could that be? He was so obviously Catholic! I don't know how to explain the impact of that experience, but it set me on a road that would eventually lead me home to Rome.

I began talking to the two Catholic friends God had placed in my life. I called up one of my

friends and said, "If I go to your church this week, would you come to mine?" I was still thinking that as compatible as our beliefs were, my friend would probably fall in love with my church and leave the Catholic Church. (Little did I know!) So the next evening I went to mass for the first time. (You can study the Church all you want, but you will never know her till you experience the Mass.)

I sat there feeling a bit nervous in such an unfamiliar environment. I was amazed at how much scripture I heard. Even the songs were mostly scripture. I heard as much if not more scripture read than I usually heard at my church. The scriptures were treated with such reverence. Could this possibly be the Church where Bibles were kept from the people?

Then came the Eucharist. Life would never be the same. Suddenly, I was overwhelmed by the Presence of God in that place. I was absolutely enveloped! I knew when I was in the Presence of God. I had been there many times before, but never with this overwhelming power. I went home praying like I never had before. "I have to have answers, Lord! What was it that just happened in there? I didn't think you even attended Catholic Church, let alone filled the place like that! Where do I begin studying? There are a million questions. What about Mary, Purgatory, Saints, losing your salvation, etc.? Where do I start, Lord?" The answer came back instant and clear. "Start with what draws you, start with the Eucharist." (What better place to start, right?)

Well, I didn't know who to trust for information. If I went to my Pastor, I knew what I would get. Run, repent, refuse to listen to those deceivers! But I knew Who I had encountered at Mass, so I prayed for wisdom. Then I remembered a man from years back. He had become very close to the Catholic Church, yet he still held many of the same beliefs I did. I had been deeply moved by what he had to say back then though I didn't understand why, and I trusted his opinion. I felt I would get some objective information from him, and since he lived so far away, I would avoid discovery. So for the next month to six weeks he fed me Catholic doctrine on the Eucharist, justification, purgatory, etc. He gave me good solid, objective information even though he is not Catholic. He sent me passages from the Early Fathers, Church documents, etc. I was absolutely shocked by the truth I was discovering. The Catholic faith was nothing I had believed it to be.

In June, my other Catholic friend gave me the book, *Rome Sweet Home* by Scott and Kimberly Hahn. I could write volumes on how that book impacted me. It's enough to say that God's Homeward call was loud and clear by the end of June.

Then came what could be called "hell" month. I decided that before I could make this decision I would have to get a more "balanced" view from both sides. I had grown up believing that the Church was the Whore of Babylon, and the Pope was the antichrist. I think this was just my last gasp effort to spare myself the humiliation of conversion. I delved into my brother's books and some other things from a Protestant, anti-Catholic perspective. Not only did these sources not ring true anymore, they produced a "black cloud" of despair that was absolutely unbearable. The

sense of spiritual warfare was intense. It was at a particularly dark, desperate moment that I called Kimberly Hahn. I knew she had experienced the same emotional agony over Scott's conversion that I was experiencing over my own. I knew she would understand. She was an angel of mercy that night. In 30 minutes I not only got her overflowing heart of love for Christ and His Church, but I received compassion and encouragement to just follow Jesus wherever He led me. We prayed together and then she gave me a most precious gift . . . Scott's secretary's email address. That has led to a wonderful relationship that has not only provided me with a wonderful catechist, but also a dear friend.

In August my family and I were on vacation and I was reading Scott's book "The Father Who Keeps His Promises." God gave me a glorious afternoon of solitude to finish the book while the family romped on the beach. When I closed the book I walked out on our balcony in San Diego and looked into the heavens and spoke out loud to the Lord, to the angels, to my brothers and sisters gathered in Heaven, "I'm Catholic! I'm coming Home!!!"

I entered OCIA classes in September. It was a long seven months to Easter Vigil. I counted the days from 233 on. I had a terrible time getting through Mass without crying during the Eucharist because I longed to receive Jesus in the way He meant me to receive Him Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity.

During those early months, and at times since, I have had to tackle issues that were so contrary to what I had been raised to believe that they sometimes scandalized me. I can understand completely the concept of "wrestling with God" because often when I began to study a facet of the faith I would enter into a period of wrestling with the Holy Spirit as I looked at the issue from all angles. At first this was enough to make me want to cut and run from studying at all. But the Holy Spirit would not let me go. His constant calling to me to follow Christ even when it was frightening was an all day, all night thing. The first few times I faced this challenge of faith, it was a terrifying experience. But I soon realized that as I trusted God and opened my heart to be taught, He showed me wondrous things. I liken it to a giant jig saw puzzle laid out on the table. As God placed piece after piece the whole picture (the organic unity of the faith) became more and more evident. At first I fought Him as He placed pieces where they should be rather than where I had them. But after the first few, I began to take courage when the process began and even looked forward to what would be after the Lord reshaped my thinking. Now, I know this process as formation. It's still an ongoing process. I don't panic anymore, I throw the doors open and invite Him to rearrange the pieces any way He wants. What glorious things come of it!

The months since my decision was made have been full of reading and studying, but not for the purpose of making the decision, but of getting to know Mother Church, and most recently my Mother Mary. That has been a delight and a surprise.

I ask your prayers for my family. My children were angry with me over my conversion for

months, but eventually my youngest daughter, Esther, started asking questions, and ended up being confirmed with me. She is the most devout little 12-year-old you could ever want to meet. She is seriously considering the religious life. Her favorite pass time is Adoration. My oldest daughter went through a few classes last year and left upset. But God, and St. Joan of Arc caught up with her this past summer and she is back in class this fall. My middle daughter is a prayer request. Please pray for my Sarah. My husband has been a prince about this. He has let me know that my conversion has been painful for him. At the same time he has given me Catholic art for our home, and has been utterly respectful of my faith. He is working with a catechist and studying on his own. He has come to see the truth of several Catholic teachings and is growing by leaps and bounds. I am beginning to see real hope that this will be a united Catholic family someday. Blessed be God forever.

Well, that is the Readers Digest version of the most amazing year of my life. I am privileged to be able to attend daily mass near my job. I rarely miss. I walk into Church every day and breathe a sign of satisfaction and thanksgiving to God for His amazing grace.

I also ask your prayers for my brother and parents. They have been very hurt about my conversion. I ask prayer for them all that they too may someday stand with Esther and I at Mass and receive the Lord.

I have had the joy of fellowshiping with the members of the Coming Home Network discussion group on the Internet since about January of this year. I can't express how helpful and supportive they have been to me. I have also had the privilege of supporting others on their journey home. Several times we have been able to address issues with people from backgrounds similar to mine. It is a humbling experience to know that your own journey has been an encouragement to someone else. It is common at the beginning of the journey home to feel like you are all alone-to feel like no one else has ever asked these questions or sensed the call of God like you do. It is delightfully surprising to find that we are not alone. There are many of us who are being drawn homeward by the Holy Spirit. The discussion group provides an ideal place for asking questions, sharing experiences, and discussing issues. We have become a real cohesive family as well.

Words fail me as I try to express the gratitude of my heart to God our Father for His amazing grace in calling me into the fullness of the faith. I am daily filled with thanksgiving for the amazing gift of the Eucharist and the fathomless depth of the Catholic faith. Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit. As it was in the beginning is now and will be forever. Amen and amen! Hallelujah!

In Jesus' heart and Mary's arms, and in the love of God,
Patty Patrick Bonds