

Judith's Story

I guess the most interesting thing about it was that the reasons for doing so did not become clear until after I made the decision to become Roman Catholic. It was not until I said "yes" to Jesus' call to me, that my reasons for becoming Catholic began to occur to me.

Although I have no relatives who are Catholic, I did have contact with Roman Catholicism as a child. I was born in a Catholic hospital, which scandalized my elderly relatives: my mother was considered "foolish" to go to a Catholic doctor. My great grandmother even predicted that I would become Catholic, although how she knew is completely beyond me: she based this opinion on the fact that I was born in a Catholic hospital.

However, it took a lot more than that to get me into the Catholic Church as you will soon see.

I was baptized as an infant in the United Church of Canada, attended Sunday School, entered into full membership in the Church at age 14, exercised my franchise at congregational meetings, and began to serve the ministry of my local congregation through committees and volunteer projects. My roots at Knox United Church were firmly planted, and to all appearances, up until just a few weeks ago, not about to go anywhere very suddenly.

Even though I had contact with Catholics throughout my growing years, in my neighborhood, and through friends of my parentsâ, who were heavily involved in the ecumenical movement during the 1960s, I do not recall ever having a serious discussion about religion with any of them. As a consequence, I developed some very odd prejudices about Catholics, first of which was that they didn't really practice any sort of religion, at least, not in any form that we would understand as Protestants.

After all, we Protestant children were always discussing religion among ourselves, comparing each other's worship styles and belief systems, and debating theological issues such as the nature of God, the requirements for entry into Heaven, whether hymns are holy or heathen, and so forth, and because the Catholic children we knew never entered into these discussions, we simply assumed that they had no religion.

The first Catholic I ever met who did discuss religion with me was my college roommate, and she hated being Catholic. She came up with what to me sounded like very odd reasons for not liking to be Catholic however, which triggered my interest, since they were so contrary to my prejudices.

She said that at the Catholic Church, all they do is read the Bible and worship Jesus.

These are good things to do at worship, in my estimation, and as my childhood prejudices fell into doubt, I became curious, in the back of my mind, about what Catholics are REALLY like. When I tried to discuss these things a little further with her, she reacted quite strongly and accused me of being "some kind of Jesus freak."

When I admitted that I am, in fact, some kind of a Jesus freak, and that I think everybody ought to be, (and that if Catholics are, then she ought to be, too,) then she gave up on me in disgust, and the subject was not brought up again. She left shortly afterwards.

I first began attending Mass in January of 1984, a few months after my roommate left, at the age of 23, in my last year of Art College, and my reason for attending the first one was because while I was out wandering around looking for something to do, I got caught up in a crowd of people who were going into St. Joseph's Church, and when I tried to get out of the crowd, a little old man (he later turned out to be Father Arthur) grabbed me by the arm and dragged me inside.

I never did have the opportunity to find out why he did that, since he became extremely ill and then died shortly afterwards.

Although I was terrified, and was experiencing a severe case of culture shock, I was also very curious, and I felt that I probably would never have a similar opportunity to see what Catholics do "when nobody's looking", so I stayed inside to take advantage of the opportunity. I felt like the whole place was buzzing with electricity, and I had a very hard time keeping still.

I fell madly in love with the Mass at first sight, and I have attended regularly on Sundays ever since.

At the time I was also attending a Plymouth Brethren Bible study club, and between what I was learning at the Bible study and what I was learning at Mass, my relationship with Jesus began to grow by leaps and bounds.

I attended the RCIA program at St. Joseph's in 1985, not because I wanted to convert, but because I wanted to learn about the symbolism and meaning of the Mass. Father Alex at St. Joseph's taught me all these things, and more, which I have kept in my heart and pondered all these years.

I was a member of Knox United Church for my entire life. I had (and at this writing have still, since I am not yet Catholic) never been a member of any other Church, although I sometimes visited other churches.

Being a member of one, and only one, church for your whole life is a very rare thing, especially in North America, where "church shopping" is something of a national sport among Christians. Even Fundamentalists, who should know better, are continually on the hunt for "a good, Bible-believing, truth-teaching church", by which they usually mean "a church that interprets the Bible the same way I do, and will teach me what I have already decided is true." I have always been against this philosophy - I have always believed that God puts you where he wants you, and to be obedient to Him, you must stay put.

Every time my Fundamentalist friend calls me up with news that she has finally found a Bible believing, truth teaching Church, and I ought to come and join it with her, I always say, "Oh, another one?" And she always says, "Yes, but this one's for real this time!" So, rather than thinking of converting either to the Catholic Church or to the Plymouth Brethren, it made more sense to me to bring back what I was learning from both places to Knox, and to enrich the life of my own congregation with these things.

Over the course of the seventeen years, I was entrusted with more and more responsibilities at Knox. I became an "Elder", when that term still had meaning, I taught Sunday School for many many years, I led adult studies, I organized retreats, I organized Communion services, I participated in liturgy planning, I helped with ushering and taking collection, I built the Church web site, and one time (October 30, 1994) I took charge of an entire worship service and even preached the sermon. I was on a discernment committee, and helped in the formation of a person entering into ordained ministry. I was, in short, a pillar of the community. But most of what I was actually learning was coming from the Catholic Church, and from the Masses that I was attending every Sunday afternoon.

During the same period of time, I got married, and for a while we lived in Brentwood, where I attended St. Luke's Church on Sunday afternoons, as well as keeping up regular attendance at Knox on Sunday mornings. I also joined the Prayer Group, which was very Pentecostal in its spirituality. I was "anointed in the Spirit", and I received the gift of tongues.

My husband ran into some difficulties in his business during 1990, and I was called upon to enter the work-force. We were forced by our situation to move to Sunalta, where I began attending Sacred Heart, in August of 1991. I also, at this time, began to attend daily Mass, and also to listen to the Rosary every day, until I had it memorized and could follow along with it. For me at the time, it was more of a mental exercise than a devotional prayer - I was using it as an aid to meditating on Scripture, and not as a way to communicate with Mary, or even with Jesus,

although I was opening up to that possibility as well.

The first person I met there was Father Myles Gaffney, and I was so struck with his child-like faith and his enthusiasm that I wanted to get to know him better. I arranged to have an interview with him during November of that year, and during the course of our discussion, which ranged all over the place, he introduced me to the Divine Office, and showed me how to pray it. He also invited me to attend his Bible study program, which I did, and I learned a great deal from him about Catholic theology. Once I started attending his Bible studies, I stopped going to the ones being run by the Plymouth Brethren, since I found that Father Myles's were more interesting to me.

In truth, the sermon that I preached at Knox in October of 1994 owed a lot to Father Myles, and also to Father Cooney, who was the senior pastor at that time, and quite an excellent homilist, in my estimation.

So much so that when I was asked to help organize an ecumenical worship service for our local chapter of Project Ploughshares in 1995, he was the first person I thought of to bring in as the homilist. He agreed to do this, and they had the highest attendance they have ever had, either before or since, for that particular service.

After Father Myles and Father Cooney left Sacred Heart to advance in their vocations, I was feeling somewhat bereft -orphaned, even. These feelings came as a surprise to me - I did not feel that these feelings were at all appropriate for someone in my position as an Elder of a Protestant church, so I pushed them down. I also had a great deal of work to do with helping my husband and with bringing our family out of financial chaos, and between these two things, although I continued to serve Knox, and I continued to attend Mass every Sunday, I stopped developing any sort of personal friendships or attending any Bible studies or midweek activities, although I did continue the committee work that I had been doing at Knox, and I did not stop teaching Sunday School.

In addition to these stresses, my grandmother became ill and was being shuffled between hospitals, care centres, and finally to a nursing home, and causing us all great anxiety. So for the next few years I was occupied primarily with these problems.

In May of 2000, I was offered an excellent job that paid extremely well compared to what we had become used to living on. The peace of mind of knowing that our financial difficulties were coming to an end was like a gift from God. Although we will never be "wealthy", we will also not starve. We were able to pay off our debts, buy a car for me to use, adopt a second World Vision foster child, and put aside some money for savings.

My increased freedom of movement meant that I was able to help a friend of mine find a job, and do a number of other things that had been sitting on my conscience for quite a while. I was even able to visit my grandmother more frequently.

We were very worried about her. She had lost the ability to walk, and was becoming delusional, even a little paranoid. In mid-August of 2000, she was hospitalized after taking a fall and fracturing her hip. She spent many weeks in the hospital, and was finally released on October 6. Because of the procedures that had been done, combined with her advanced age, (she was 88 years old) she had lost the use of her voice, and was unable to eat any kind of solid food. In addition to these problems, she had no idea where she was most of the time - she was completely disoriented.

We thought that she was going to recover once she got to the nursing home, and was surrounded by her familiar things. However, once she was there, her condition immediately began to deteriorate, and it became clear within a very few days that she was not going to survive.

She began to refuse both food and water, preferring simply to sleep. She slept for nearly two weeks, and gave herself up to the Lord on Monday, October 23, 2000, at approximately 9:00 am, just as Beth, her personal nurse, was about to open the Bible and read to her from her daily readings.

The day before, we had had Lorraine, one of the ministers at Knox, come to pray with us and with Grandma. When I looked into her face, I knew that whatever we did or said meant nothing to her. I felt that she was afraid of meeting Jesus, and that nothing that we were doing was reassuring her or helping her.

I could not help thinking of a Catholic friend of mine who had died amid the chanting of Rosaries and the Prayers for the Sick, and felt a little jealous. The words of Oscar Wilde came to me at that moment - "It is better to die a Catholic."

Looking back later, I also realized in a very profound way that what one's relatives think of one at the end of one's life is so completely unimportant, compared to what God thinks of one, and also, I suddenly realized that the reason I had been avoiding converting to the Catholic Church was because of what my parents and brother and husband would think of me.

The prayers and the funeral were all perfectly fitting, and beautiful. We hosted my aunt, (my mother's sister) at our place. She mentioned to me that at the funeral, they had pulled the casket away too quickly - she had wanted to touch it to say goodbye to her mother.

We went to Tulsa for the grave-side service, since that was where my grandmother's grave had been purchased some 60 years previously. She was to be buried next to my grandfather. They both believed in the bodily resurrection of the dead, and for this reason, they wanted to be buried together, so that on the last day they will rise together.

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I remember reflecting that Father Alex once told me that this is a Roman Catholic belief. The grave-side service was held on November 1, All Saints Day on the Roman Catholic calendar. Just before the service began, I touched the casket on my aunt's behalf, (because she couldn't be there) and said to my grandmother, "This is from Marilyn. She loves you and she wanted to say goodbye."

This was my first actual experience of speaking to someone who has passed on into Heaven, but at the time it felt perfectly natural. I finally understood what the Catholics mean when they speak of "praying to the Saints." In addition, when I wrote to my aunt and told her I had done this, she responded, "You have no idea how much better that made me feel, knowing you did that, and told her that."

My aunt is an atheist, and surrounds herself with atheists, and as far as I know, has never encountered any Roman Catholics or any beliefs about talking to those who have gone to Heaven. If this seemed natural and normal to her, of all people, then there must be something in the way God has designed us, that when we are not on the defensive, we expect this kind of thing; it is not only not unnatural, it is a relief to the soul to know that it can and has been done.

So I had all of these emotions and all of this history coming together and waking something up inside me. I spent a few weeks analyzing my feelings, coming to terms with my grandmother's death, and the events surrounding it. I felt called to become Roman Catholic on November 28, 2000, at about 6:30 in the evening.

I was witnessing to someone, and wishing that I was Catholic so that I could say, "It doesn't matter how you personally interpret the Bible, the Church teaches us that this is immoral behavior, and you can't just make the Bible say or not say what you think it should or should not say; you are not the person in charge of it." I had a strong sensation that Jesus was saying to me, "It's time. You need to become Catholic, and you need to become Catholic right now."

My first priority was to make certain that this was indeed Jesus speaking, and not just my own wish for an easy way out, or even the Devil. So I prayed about it for two days. For the whole two days, I felt as if my whole body was full of electricity, just like that first time that I had gone to Mass. I was feeling incredibly happy, even though I was still in mourning for my grandmother.

Even so, I argued with Jesus about this. I said "Didn't you put me at Knox when I was born, because that was where you needed me?" And he replied, "Yes I did, and you have served me well there, but now I require you to obey the call I have been making to you these seventeen years."

I'm not quite sure why I thought this next argument would be a particularly good one, but then I said, "Am I not supposed to honor my mother and my father? This will make my mother very upset." Jesus said to me, "Who made you? You belong to me, not to her."

So on November 30, 2000, at about 7:00 pm, I said to Jesus, "Yes, I will become Catholic." And I then said to my husband, "I think I want to become Catholic, and I think I want to talk to a priest." His eyes bugged out and he stared at the wall for a minute, and then he said, "As long as I don't have to do anything, it's okay with me."

It took me a while to get my courage up, but I met with Father Patrick Cramer on December 20, 2000, and, on his advice, I resigned from my committees, passed my Sunday School class to someone else, and stopped attending Knox. My last day at Knox was January 7, 2001. I left a letter for Mr. Dawson, the senior minister of Knox, explaining that I would not be returning, since I intended to become Roman Catholic. I immediately came out of Knox when the service ended at 12:10, and went straight to the 12:30 Mass at Sacred Heart, without stopping for anything except red lights.

I began attending RCIA on January 10, 2001.

On January 11, I told my mother about my intention to become Catholic, and I told her that Jesus had said "You belong to me, not to her." I told her this so that she would understand that I must obey Jesus, and that I had no intentions of deliberately hurting her feelings.

She then told me something which surprised me very much. She said, "On the day that you were born, Jesus came to me and said, 'When your daughter grows up, she will do something completely unexpected. When she does this, you are not to stop her. You must remember that she belongs to me, not to you.'"

So, I am going to become Catholic, and my reason is that, by various signs, Jesus told me to. When I next hear from my Fundamentalist friend, I am going to say to her, "Hey! Guess what! I found this really great Bible believing, truth teaching Church!"