

If We Only Knew then What We Know Now...A Conversion Story

By Russ and Deborah Rentler

Growing Up Catholic

Russ:

I was baptized into the Catholic faith as an infant. Though my parents weren't very religious, they made sure we went to church and received all the sacraments. My mother bought 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 a Catholic and felt bad for my best friend who was not. My memories of the teaching nuns were pleasant 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 with.

Deb:

I was the youngest of 4 children. 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.

My father's side of the family had deep Catholic roots. 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 a family friend(who was also Catholic and married with three children). 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 want to be Catholic anymore 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 faith at the time. My grandmother who was divorced and re-married to an ex-Catholic friar attended Mass daily. She would come visit our family a few times a year and entertain me with stories of astrology. She once told me me that I would always have bad luck being born under the sign of the Capricorn!

The parish I was attending didn't seem to place an emphasis on personal devotion and their annual New Year's Eve party was known as the place to be on New Year's Eve. 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 what I thought was the priorities of our parish at that time.

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 from my father. 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 the counter-culture as we quietly observed our parent's sad life.

Despite going to Mass on Sunday and every Holy day of obligation, our practice of Catholicism did not provide any real comfort to us and I basically rejected it. My parents faith didn't seem to have a positive effect on them ,yet I remember my Dad 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 did have a place in his life. I later dismissed his devotion as “works- based” and thought he we 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 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. Sunday afternoons were very unpleasant and my brothers and I would leave the house as my parents bickering 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.

One respite from this teenage rebellion occurred 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's drinking escalated and she also married an alcoholic. My father and his second wife were on the verge of divorce because of alcoholism.

Alateen was a great help to me. It was there that I started to hear about God again for the first time in years. The members used the term “Higher Power.” They talked as if they knew God personally and I wanted to know him too. I would ask people from Alateen and Alanon how they knew who their Higher Power was. No one could tell me.

Alateen awakened in me a desire to know God that has never really diminished. During high school the search for Him was primarily focused toward connecting with others who seemed to know Him. At times I would visit the church of a friend or discover that someone I worked with was a born-again Christian. All of these folks were protestants and they were 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, but not completely.

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 college seven hours from home. 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 Sacred Scripture. It had no meaning for me and God was not even mentioned in it yet I was strangely comforted by it. The song was from 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 in 8th grade 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 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 very readable and was illustrated with beautiful simple drawings. 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 very apprehensive at this meeting but the people were kind 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 had been a rebel himself. 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 any substance could have ever produced. 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 electric guitars and amps. We immediately repented of the life we had been living and set out on a whole new journey. As young teenagers growing up in a dysfunctional family, this was a true miracle to be suddenly released from the poor choices we were starting to make. Our brief flirtation with the Age of Aquarius thankfully came to an end.

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 biblical 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. We scoffed at all her arguments then, but now I realize how much she really did understand.

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 we turned them against the Catholic Church. We regularly took up street witnessing in a small city nearby and joyfully endured ridicule for our efforts. 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 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 bible scholars, theologians, and 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 the early church went "off track" during the time of Constantine and were told that there had always been a "remnant of true believers" outside of the Catholic Church. A teenage friend held Bible studies in his basement and taught me from sources such as the anti-Catholic Chick Tracts. Most of the young teachers in our bible studies were ardent anti-Catholics and former Catholics themselves. We were given an opportunity to take as many Chick Tracts at the end of each fellowship meeting. I accepted all these anti-Catholic teachings completely 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 "myths" about the Church. I started to form a strong anti-Catholic bias based on my lukewarm 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."

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 from Plymouth NH to a college closer to home. My sophomore year of college was filled with fun and friendship. However, 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, even to the point of denying sin altogether.

Meanwhile, my friend Jessica from Alateen was being converted. She became a born-again Christian and started witnessing to me relentlessly. Whenever we got together she would talk about Jesus and the Bible non-stop. I asked her a lot of questions that she had some very good 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 thought a lot about eternity and hell. 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 understood the Incarnation! I mistakenly thought that God exalted one man to become God rather than humbling Himself to become a man.

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 who came to Colorado with me, "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 Jesus 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 continued 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 time I stopped pursuing 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 playing my music for a time. There was a joke at the time among Christian musicians that "Anything above the third fret is of the Devil", but they may have taken it too seriously!

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 inoperable 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 worst 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 misinterpret 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 his wife 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.

I was content at this church mostly because of the friendships I had formed. However, 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 their lack of concern for the poor. And although the church was filled with young enthusiastic young adults, there

seemed to be very little reverence for God because of the emphasis on friendship with Him and the once saved always saved theology.

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 evangelical/charismatic 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. I also took notice of how she, a Catholic, 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 one nagging question that would enter my thoughts for the next several years.

Around this time of my life, many of my friends from the young adult group at my church started getting engaged. It seemed as if I would never get married and I began to feel restless. When a new job 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 immersed myself in the life of the church. I became friends with a young married couple who were like a big brother and sister to me. I attended church retreats, joined the 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.”

I often stopped at a Fatima 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 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. Also 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 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 and never struggled again with that particular issue.

The year that Sue (Russ's late wife) began to get very ill was a sad one for New Covenant Christian Community. 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 she and Russ. Sue and I were on the dance team together; I babysat their boys and taught them Sunday school.

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 also wanted to be married, 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 church 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 didn't seem to touch me in my struggles as a new wife and step-mother.

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. No matter how much I prayed, read the Bible, or sang worship songs, I could not seem to find joy. 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. In addition I read some of the writings of Therese of Liseux and Thomas A Kempis. I learned about the Catholic view of suffering. I began to accept the teaching that our suffering can be valuable, even salvific. (Col. 1:24) One day I thought, "I need something to help me through each day." I remembered that Catholics had Mass every day and thought that might help. Russ had no problem with it so I went. After my first Mass, I was hooked. I found out when the daily Masses were at all the local parishes. One evening Mass 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?"

That question was like a crack in the door that opened my heart up to the Catholic Church. I began to read about and long for the Eucharist. It was very difficult though because Russ was not open to returning to the Catholic Church. You can't imagine my sorrow in realizing that after all the years of praising Jesus, praying and reading the Bible, going on retreats and doing just about anything to get close to Him and all that time He was waiting for me in the tabernacle of my local Catholic Church. Not only that, but there was a chance I might never be able to receive Him in the Eucharist again because of my husband's unwillingness to return 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 experienced 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 started reading about suffering from Mother Theresa and Theresa Liseux and the Catholic mystics. This led her to find comfort in Catholic teaching on suffering 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 misinformed 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 3 1/2 years 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.