

My Personal History

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(A Former Catholic Nun)

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I started out as a “liberal” intellectual who was prejudiced against Christianity. I had been taught to believe that Christians were gullible people who were either stupid or uneducated. I was basically an agnostic who didn’t know or care whether God existed. For me, the idea of God was irrelevant. I looked to science, psychology, and politics to save mankind from its problems.

During my senior year in high school, I fell in love with a young man who was a devout Catholic. That was my first encounter with someone who strongly believed in God. I may have met Christians before that, but they didn’t make their Christian beliefs known to me.

This young man had a quality about him that was different from anything that I had encountered before. He prayed. He loved God. He was a man of principle and integrity. His life was guided by his religious beliefs. He had hope. He had a kind of compassion and respect for people that I had not seen before. There was something different about him. I didn’t know what it was, but whatever it was, I wanted it. I figured that it had something to do with his religion, so I started taking instruction in Catholicism. The young man moved overseas and I didn’t see him again, but I continued studying Catholicism.

During my first year of college I majored in biology. I also studied French and Latin. I went to a local priest every week for instruction. Under his direction, I studied many books including the “Baltimore Catechism” and biographies of well known modern Catholics. This was in the days of the Latin Mass, before there was a formal catechumen program. When I returned home for the summer, I found another priest to continue my instruction.

Due to illness I did not return to college the following year. For several years I continued to study with that priest, while working to earn money for college. The priest gave me more books to study including the works of C.S. Lewis and G.K. Chesterton, and a series of booklets on Scripture. (There was a booklet for each book of the Bible. On each page, the top half of the page contained Scripture and the bottom half contained a Catholic commentary about those chapters of Scripture.)

My job was close to a Catholic Church, and I went to Mass during lunch hour. I prayed for God to give me faith. I was praying even though I wasn’t sure that God existed. My very first prayer was, “God, if You’re out there, show me.” I didn’t take communion because I wasn’t a Catholic. I only said as much of the Apostles Creed as I actually believed. It was a long time before I could even say the opening phrase, “I believe in God”.

C.S. Lewis was a great help to me. He was a brilliant man whose books “Miracles” and “Mere Christianity” dealt with my intellectual barriers to believing in God. I read those books many times. I also read everything else I could find that Lewis had written, including collections of his essays, his autobiography, a collection of his poems, collections of his letters, his writings about English literature, his “Narnia” series, and his science fiction trilogy. I also read books written by Lewis’ friends: C.K. Chesterton, Dorothy Sayers, and J.R.R. Tolkien. Dorothy Sayers’ collection of essays about Christian doctrine was very helpful. [Note 1] Even works of Christian fiction were helpful, because they taught me a lot about Christian friendships, Christian character, and Godly ways of responding to stressful and dangerous situations. (With the exception of the Catholic young man, I had not yet seen this modeled in real life.)

After several years I was baptized a Roman Catholic. Soon afterwards, my brother also became a Catholic. His instruction was through group classes. I attended those classes with him. I was hungry to learn anything that I could about God.

I went back to school. I attended a Catholic college where I majored in Religious Education. I enjoyed Metaphysics and some of my classes. However, my classes on Scripture taught a lot of modern “higher criticism,” and some of my Religious Education teachers taught things that seemed to be contrary to the official teachings of the Catholic Church. I found a priest who was conservative, and I checked teachings out with him to see if they were the official teaching of the Catholic Church. Because I no longer trusted the teachings of the Religious Education department, I changed majors.

When I entered the convent, I was careful to choose a conservative one which followed the official teachings of the Catholic Church. My training for religious life included studying the documents of the Second Vatican Council, other books relating to Catholic doctrine, and biographies of well known saints.

I spent over two years as a postulant and a novice. After two years of training and preparation, our mother superior decided that I should not make vows. The purpose of being a novice is for the leaders of the convent, as well as the candidate, to decide whether or not the candidate should go ahead and take vows. If the candidate does take vows, at first they are temporary, for one year at a time. There are still years of testing and discerning before permanent vows are taken. At least, that's how it was done at our convent. I left the convent on good terms and have been in contact with the sisters from time to time since then.

I believe that decision for me to leave the convent was God's protection, because we didn't get regular physical examinations at our convent; we only saw a doctor if we were really sick. When I got home, my parents had me get a physical examination. I had pre-cancerous polyps in my colon. A few years later I had cancer in both breasts. (A doctor found the lumps during a routine physical exam.) If I had stayed in the convent, I would have died of colon cancer and breast cancer. (Dying is never fun. But being eaten up with cancer is definitely not my choice of how to do it, if it can be avoided.)

Our mother superior was very careful about which priests she allowed to say Mass at our convent. We had priests who were loyal to God and to the Catholic Church. They believed both the Bible and Church Tradition. They were faithful men.

When I left the convent and went to live with my parents, I couldn't find priests like that. The local priests seemed to have little faith and little loyalty, either to God or to the Catholic Church. I remember one Mass where the homily [a short sermon] was so distressing that I left in tears. I stayed outside, weeping. But then I went back in, in order to take communion. I tried every Catholic Church in town, but I couldn't find a good priest anywhere.

The problem is that these days, many seminaries teach things which are contrary to the official teaching of the Catholic Church. A friend of mine left the seminary because he felt that his professors were destroying his faith. There are Catholic theologians who openly question foundational Christian doctrines like the Incarnation and the Resurrection. Some Catholic theologians even question the existence of God, or else redefine "God" in such a way that He seems meaningless and irrelevant. I don't understand it. If they really believe that stuff, then they have no business calling themselves Catholics. But they do. And people listen to them -- especially in seminaries. (Malachi Martin discusses Catholic theologians Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, Karl Rahner, Hans Kung, Charles Curran and others in his book, "The Jesuits: The Society of Jesus and the Betrayal of the Roman Catholic Church." Fr. Martin was a Jesuit priest, a Vatican insider, and the personal confessor of Pope John XXIII). [Note 2]

Meanwhile, my parents had become Christians. They had joined a little Methodist church where the pastor believed the Bible and loved the people. Because the local Catholic Churches were distressing, I started going to early morning Mass (out of duty) and then attending the Methodist church with my parents. When they joined another Scripturally based Protestant church, I followed them there, while still attending early morning Mass on Sundays. I did the splits for years.

My brother became a devout Catholic. He assisted the priests at Mass for many years. He lived several hours' drive away from us. We had a tradition that on Easter and Christmas, he would come visit and we would go to Midnight Mass together.

One Christmas, at Midnight Mass, the priest taught that the Christmas story as presented in the Bible is basically a pious fairy tale to make people feel good, but it has nothing to do with reality. My brother got so angry that he wanted to jump up and shout, "Are we here to celebrate it or to debate it?"

The next day, we went to church with our parents. The pastor there told us that Daniel had been in charge of the "wise men" of Babylon (magi). Therefore, they knew about Baalam's prophecy that the King of the Jews would be heralded by a star. Their religion included watching the stars for signs. So when they saw the special star, they realized that it signaled the coming of this special King of the Jews. Also, one of their functions was to decide who the valid king was if there was a controversy about it. So when they came to confirm that Jesus was truly the King of the Jews, they were fulfilling their official function.

Needless to say, the contrast was striking. And troubling. I did a lot of praying after that. By the following Easter, I had left the Catholic Church and joined my parents' church.

I didn't know what to tell my brother and his wife, because they were coming to visit at Easter, and I did not want to go to Midnight Mass with them. We had a long, awkward telephone conversation. Then I finally told them. They started laughing. They had also left the Catholic Church, and were in the process of visiting different churches, trying to find a church home.

Since then I have been struggling with issues related to Catholicism. The papers I have written have emerged from that struggle.

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May the Lord bless you, guide you, and reveal Himself to you.

Mary Ann Collins
October 20, 2001

NOTES

1. Dorothy Sayers, "The Whimsical Christian". This collection of her essays has been reprinted and is available at Amazon.com. (The term "Whimsical" probably comes from her series of detective stories, which feature a character named Lord Peter Wimsey.)
2. Malachi Martin, "The Jesuits: The Society of Jesus and the Betrayal of the Roman Catholic Church." New York: Touchstone (a branch of Simon & Schuster, Inc.), 1988, pages 272-302.

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