



Chapter 1

“All the way to heaven...is heaven.” --St. Teresa of Avila

The spiritual journey begins long before we are even aware of it, for we are not the initiators of it. As much as we like to think that we are in charge of all of our life, the truth is, we are really just responding to moments of grace that God places before us. Along the road, we may receive moments of clarity called conversions that lead to transformation. About what do we suddenly see more clearly? We see and we experience Love. It's as if the Lord is tapping our shoulder saying, “Here I am. Come follow Me.” And miraculously, by His grace, we do...

The Wake Up Call

I am not sure if it was the spectacular, grand-finale ending of a ten-day fast, or the crashing upon my mind and heart of all he had said in the Catechism class that had me just this side of utterly deflated—or a combination of both. But what happened next could not have been more unexpected.

There she was. As beautiful and sparkly-eyed as a seventeen-year-old Mother of God could be. I knew who she was immediately by her smile—her kind and gentle gaze into my heart, into my doubts and fears. Her knowing that I was feeling distraught at the prospect of never fully becoming all I hoped to be— all because of her—all because of what he had said I must believe about her and in my mind, I knew I could not at this time accept. And yet, she came to me anyway.

And what she spoke to me... how humble, how astonishing...the very core of truth. If I were making this up, I would have imagined a much more bucolic setting—a beautiful garden, a mountainside, a grassy river bank, a forest trail, really just about anywhere but where I was—on a busy road, on a less than glamorous stretch of strip-mall-lined suburban commercial wasteland. But it was where she chose to be with me, in my everyday trek to the grocery store to buy in bulk what I had for ten days denied myself in order to gain clarity. And clarity is what she delivered.

As I drove, I re-hashed the words I'd heard in the class...*Immaculate Conception, Ever Virgin, without sin*. My formerly Baptist brain, though having already been stretched into a more sacramentally receptive vessel, was now being asked to contort into a new realm of open-mindedness. Mental and spiritual gymnastics aside, I did not think I could conform to this new way of thinking, of believing. It was just asking too much.

There had been a slight glimmer of hope near the end of the class. He mentioned something called the *Law of Graduality*. It refers to the idea that if you run into a very difficult teaching, you can take all the time you need to digest the truth, trusting that God will show you the way, BUT... you have to leave room for that to happen. Was I willing to consider that what he said about Mary could possibly be true? I think he saw me drifting-off, possibly deciding to reject his “Mary,” which would have meant leaving behind that which had captivated my spiritual senses with its heavenly aroma and made me hungrily long for nothing else. I was so close. It was all going so well, up until today. Today, the Terrible! Today the END! Today...her. Yes, today HER! And today her: wonderful, beautiful, kind, gentle, loving, humble, sweet and just what I needed...her.

But I get ahead of myself. Where to start? My birth? My re-birth? My thousand little deaths? I'm so boring and so small and He and what He does is so much more interesting, but to give you a frame of reference of who He was dealing with, this may be helpful. I will try to be brief.

Let's start at the beginning. I was born in Houston, Texas, the granddaughter of a Southern Baptist minister and daughter of a Texas oil man and a world-class Bible teaching mom. I was

the youngest of three daughters, and we were raised “Texas Proud.” Some of my earliest memories are riding in the back of a flat bed pick up that we called the “hick-up truck” with my sisters, racing down a dusty, hot, dirt road squealing with delight, bandana head scarves flapping in the breeze. We were taught to love God, His Word, country, family, and all things “merican!” We were also taught to share this love and to be kindhearted to everyone we met. My grandmother was a shining example. Thanksgiving at her house was like a mini United Nations assembly session. We would be eating Lebanese meat pies and Vietnamese dumplings, brought by several of her “families,” while the Mariachi band my sister befriended at a local Mexican restaurant would play “La Bamba” between bites of turkey. This is how we loved and served God, by evangelizing (telling and sharing the Good News of Jesus) especially to those who were not Christians.

“Not Christian” was a vast array of people. Catholics were definitely in that category. I was not taught what they were exactly, but they were not Christians (or at least not our kind of Christians), and therefore, we were to be wary. We were to love them, for sure, but to look on them as people who needed “straightening out.” Most importantly, they needed to be taught the Bible, as it was unfathomable and against all we believed that one could be a Christian and not know or at least want to know the Bible cover to cover.

As a Baptist, that is how we experienced Jesus—not through sacrament, but through His Word. And, just to be clear about what a Southern Baptist is, I’ll shed a little light on my particular upbringing. We were far more than a list of do’s and don’ts. We were people who really, deeply loved God. Yet we were often mistakenly called “snake handlers” or “pew jumpers” by the uninformed. We were certainly not that, Baptists share a history with the very reserved Puritans, not the far more exciting Pentecostals. We were told no drinking, dancing, smoking, nor gambling (which included dice, cards, and betting on BINGO...but oddly enough, not dominoes for some strange reason)-these were all prohibited. We did not believe that the gifts of the Holy Spirit were still active (no “funny business” as I was told). There could be no revelation after the Bible had been written—no “divine healings,” no “speaking in tongues,” no “supernatural manifestations” of any kind, really. Just the BIBLE—Sola- Scriptura—“The Bible Alone.” Later in life, I did wonder what happened to all of those beautiful gifts listed in 1 Corinthians, Chapter 12. I had read the Bible many times over and, quite frankly, had never found an expiration date on them. But as you can see, the stories of the saints, the Eucharistic feast, divine grace imparted through the sacraments, and so many other of the Church’s teachings were for us imaginary fairy tales or witchcraft, hocus-pocus, from which we were to keep a safe distance.

I distinctly remember my mother telling me that the only Democrat my very staunch Democratic Baptist grandfather had refused to vote for was John F. Kennedy, because he was a Catholic. And what I heard from my grandfather, or read from his collection of books stated that the Pope was not only unchristian...but that he was possibly the “devil himself.” Therefore, I assumed that all things coming from him or from the Catholic Church were not from God. The signs I read advertising “Parish Bingo Night” were evidence enough of that! Who was I to argue with my grandfather? He was the one who knew the Bible so well and had inspired my mother and me to become Bible teachers. I believed him when he said that what was not strictly in the Bible would lead to false doctrine and apostasy. So, quite obviously, I was more than a little dubious of

Catholic Church teaching, traditions, the sacraments, and the saints. “Aren’t we all saints?” I reasoned. And the most astonishing thing I learned about Catholics was that they worshiped idols! I was erroneously taught that Catholics worshipped Mary, prayed to statues and, worst of all, did something called “Eucharistic Adoration,” which of course, we absolutely did not understand... staring at *Bread*? I was told that these faulty practices were “false gods and detestable to the Lord” and could possibly land me in hell if I had *anything* to do with them. I was to avoid them at all cost or else run the risk of offending my God, Whom I loved so much. So, as I grew up, the very thought of being a Catholic was actually not only very strange and confusing to me, it was terrifying!

“Hate what is evil and cling to what is good.”¹ This is what we learned as Baptists. It was not out of a heart of malice that our suspicion of Catholicism was born, but out of a heart trying to please God in all that we did. My thinking was very much like St. Paul before his conversion experience. St. Paul, a learned Pharisee who persecuted and killed early Christians also truly thought what he was doing was right, and he too had elders to back him up.

Fast-forward a handful of years and many thousands of miles traveled from Texas. I married the most handsome and devout man who happened to be my dear friend from high school, and we moved to Washington, DC. He became a highly respected architect and I worked in the design field. In time, we were blessed with four wonderful daughters. After the birth of our first child, I left my design work to start an interdenominational women’s Bible study program. By God’s grace, several years after the birth of our third child my husband and I had inched our way slowly, slowly, sacramentally into the Anglican Church, for reasons you will read about later. There I considered myself to be the “Protestant Poster Child,” the world’s happiest Protestant. Though my life was not perfect, I felt I had at last found a home in the church where we belonged. It had a wonderful mix of sound Bible teaching, worship, healing prayer, and a great youth program for our kids. All was going so well, what more could I want?

Then it came.

The challenge.

No, the wake up call.

With a flash of a blinding smile punctuated by hot pink lipstick, five-foot-two, tanned and brilliantly bedazzled Janice, one of the wonderful women whom I had the privilege of teaching for about twenty years in the Bible study, had the nerve to come up to me and say, “I have finally found someone who loves Jesus more than you do!”

Smirk!

I was so caught off guard.

“WHAT!?! No way!” I said, brushing her comment aside.

“Oh, yes I have,” she persisted, “and...he is a Catholic priest!”

Now I *knew* she wasn’t telling the truth!

¹ Romans 12:9

“Everyone knows that Catholic priests don’t love Jesus! They only love Mary!” I exclaimed. And then my internal dialogue starting to kick in. “Silly Janice!” I thought dismissively.

But she insisted. “Oh he really does! You just have to meet him! And, by the way, he works at a retreat center, so if you go and meet him, maybe you could see if we can use his center for our Bible study retreat.”

“Hmmm,” I thought. “Well, we do need a venue for the spring retreat, and I would *really* like to meet someone she thinks loves Jesus more than I do—just so I can prove her *wrong*! She just must not know what she is talking about. Catholic priest! Ha!”

“Okay,” I said. “You’re on!”

After getting his number from her, I called him and made an appointment. I wanted to check this off my to-do list and lovingly put her in her place. I can’t really remember what I was thinking when I drove to the retreat center. I had, over the years, met many amazing Catholics and therefore softened on my stance thinking now that perhaps not *all* Catholics were going to hell, though I was still very confused about what exactly they *did* believe. Even with this new insight I was a bit nervous about having our retreat at a Catholic center. I had, out of necessity (so I thought), sent my girls to Catholic schools in the District of Columbia. They offered a very good education at a very fair price. But we had not engaged in the parish. I was very quick to teach my kids all that we did not believe nor have in common with Catholics, (but never pointed out all that we did have in common.)

And so, I parked my car and unsuspectingly made my way in to meet the man whom God would use to change my life forever.

One of the many great things about God is His sense of humor. He is always full of surprises, as Pope Francis would say. Of course, at the time, I did not find any of this a bit funny.

First of all, the retreat center was beautiful, warm, light-filled, and welcoming. For some reason, I had expected it to be cold, dark, and institutional, mirroring what I thought the Church was like. And I was equally surprised when I met the priests who were not at all what I was expecting. They were a group of very young, warm, funny, joyful, kind, handsome, and sincere men. For some reason, I had thought they would be stiff-necked and old, personified dogmas (though I had never read a dogma and did not exactly know what one was), instead of real live flesh and blood filled with God’s holy fire.

And then, I met him—Fr. Michael. The minute I spoke to him, I knew I had been bested. Janice was right! He did love Jesus more than I did! He did! He knew Jesus like I did not. I could see it. It was in his eyes, in his voice, in his words, in his mannerisms. It was Jesus! Everywhere! He was focused and mission driven. He was like an arctic tanker cutting his way through deep ice. There was no stopping him. I knew that he had something I did not. But what? How? I had the sweetest, most intimate relationship with the Lord. He was my best friend. He was my all, my everything. I had read the Bible daily since I was twelve and I thought I knew Him like no other. But still, he, this *priest* had something more! How? I needed to know. I wanted what he had, the light switch was turned on to me seeing that perhaps there was still a great deal more to learn about my faith, but I did not dare ask, so I listened.

To this day, I have no idea what he thought of me back then. I knew he knew of me and the women I taught, as he saw quite a few of them on a regular basis for a sort of spiritual coaching. I do not know if he knew from the start what God was about to do in my life. All I know is that near the end of our conversation, after he had given me a tour of the retreat center and tried to explain to me the statue of the Sacred Heart of Jesus (I might as well have had feathers in my ears), and after...after...after what seemed like forever, I could take it no more.

I blurted out, “What is it!? What do you have that I don’t have? Janice told me that you love Jesus more than I do, and I believe she may be right!”

He smiled and with a bit of a chuckle and a humble shrug of his shoulders, simply said, “It’s the Eucharist.”

I sat down, a bit stunned, but feeling that what he said was true. All I could say was, “*I knew it!*” And how *did* I know? It had been revealed to me years before, but at that time, I was not ready to take it all in.

He then encouraged me, “Try going to an Adoration Chapel. You’ll see,” he said.

“Anything but that!” I thought. “Why would he tell me to go there?” Instead, I reasoned that if I just talked to him a while longer, I could figure it all out without having to go that far out of my comfort zone.

We decided to pray about whether he would be willing to see me regularly about spiritual matters. He then invited me to join a small weekly Catechism class that he would lead. He invited Janice and another Catholic friend who was exploring her faith more deeply to join us as well. I told him that there was really no need for me to take the class as I would *never* become a Catholic, but he argued that, if half of the women I taught in the Bible study were Catholic, shouldn’t I know at least what they believed? He sounded so...reasonable.

I prayed about it and felt the Lord’s urging, and so we began to meet weekly for the class and, much to my surprise, I was agreeing with most of what Fr. Michael was saying. I began to read the Catechism and found it beautiful, a real treasure. I had thought it would be as inspiring as reading the phone book, but much to my delight it was a true gift from the Church. It was the collection of about two thousand years of wisdom and commentary on the Book I loved the most, the Bible. I could not believe I had been a Christian for so long and had missed out entirely on reading this treasure. I was beginning to feel, against all odds, that despite everything I was taught to fear, avoid, and disbelieve, the Lord might possibly be calling me to become, of all things, a Catholic! How could it be?

This period of discernment was tumultuous and confounding. Until I *knew* what I was to do, I told no one but my husband and Fr. Michael what was taking place in my soul. I was in great anguish keeping this “secret,” but since I was still just exploring possibilities, I did not want to upset anyone close to me until the Lord made very clear the path that I was to take.

Fr. Michael continued to urge me to go to the Adoration Chapel, but I was too afraid of possibly offending my God. I knew that there was something “Other” in there, something I did not understand, because God, in His loving and very kind way had given me a glimpse of Himself, heaven on earth, a few years earlier. I was hungry now and I was seeking Him like never before and I felt, if I asked, He would answer me. Little did I know He was going to give me a great deal more than I could ever have dared to hope for. All that stood in the way was a three-number pass code, a great deal of fear, and forty-five years of hard-wired Protestant theology.

Before I unlocked the door to the Adoration Chapel, a door in my heart had to be pried open. The state of my hardened heart reminded me of the Pre-Raphaelite painting entitled “The Light of the World” in which William Holman Hunt depicts Christ standing on the outside of a dwelling in the dark, holding an illuminated lantern and knocking at a door, ancient and overgrown with weeds. Curiously, there is no handle on the exterior. The door can be opened only from the inside, and that is right where I found myself. It was not the lock on the outside of the Adoration Chapel door that kept me away, but the bar on the inside of my heart. Had there not been an encouraging rapping a few years earlier by our loving Lord, I would never have had the courage to press the buttons to unlock the door and experience that which would lead me much, much closer to Him.

Praise: Thank you Lord for the *Law of Graduality*, a gift from the Church, a chance to explore the Faith more fully, go deeper and open to all.

Prayer: Lord, please give me an open mind and a teachable heart to seek You beyond my own understanding or fears. Always give me the grace of allowing the *Law of Graduality* to work in my life so that I do not fall into religious ossification and become inflexible, unable to be bent and molded into new shapes that more resemble You.

Promise: Paul speaking, “May the eyes of your heart be illuminated, so that you may know what is the hope of his calling, and the wealth of the glory of his inheritance with the saints...”
Ephesians 1:18

Proof of the Promise: I have learned that if we will allow room for the Holy Spirit to shed light on our heart even the slightest bit, God will reveal Himself and His Truth to us. He will more than exceed our greatest expectations.

Ponder: Journal here about your own upbringing. What is *your* story? Are there parts of your faith that as an adult you might want to inquire about further? If so...what are they? Perhaps take these issues to your priest, pastor or spiritual director. Or you might want to consider joining an ALPHA course to explore your faith with others. Go to <http://www.alpha.org/catholic-context/home> or www.alphausa.org Alpha is an 8-12 week program that explores the basics of the Christian faith that is run in both Catholic and Protestant Churches.