



**Why I Am
Still a Catholic**

Volume Seven

**THROUGH THE PATH
THAT CUT THE JUNGLE**

by

Sean Hurt



*Why I Am Still a Catholic
Through the Path that Cut the Jungle*

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Edited by Ronda Chervin

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About the
WHY I AM STILL A CATHOLIC
Series of Booklets

by Ronda Chervin, Ph.D., Editor

(Dr. Ronda is a Professor of Philosophy,
a Catholic writer, a Presenter on Catholic TV and
Radio and a Dedicated Widow)

In the year 2016 I read somewhere that 60% of Catholics have left the Church or only attend occasionally!

I was shocked! Myself a convert from an atheist but Jewish background, Jesus, manifested and coming to me, in the Catholic Church is the greatest joy in my life...from time into eternity!

How could it be that so many Catholics have lost faith in a church that offers so much?

I believe it was the Holy Spirit that suggested to me a remedy.

Suppose the parish racks had little booklets written by strong believers, such as myself, describing why we are still Catholics in spite of many of the same experiences which have alienated other Catholics! Such a series of booklets could attract wavering Catholics or be given by strong Catholics to family and friends who have left us. In this way our series was born.

So, now I address all wavering Catholics, and all those who have left the Catholic faith, and beg you to give us one more chance. Could it hurt to say a little prayer, such as this?

Jesus, if you are really the Son of God, and you want me to receive fullness of grace through the Word and Sacraments in the Catholic Church, open me to the witness of the writers of these booklets. As they tell me why they are still Catholics, please tell me why I should still be a Catholic!



In her voyage across the ocean of this world, the Church is like a great ship being pounded by the waves of life's different stresses. Our duty is not to abandon ship but to keep her on her course.

Saint Boniface

INTRODUCTION



My name is Sean Hurt. I am a husband, a father and currently a Ph. D. candidate in geology at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. The story that follows is a brief account of my conversion to the Catholic Faith from an atheistic background which occurred while my wife and I were serving abroad through the U.S. Peace Corps. We were sent to Malawi, a small country in southeastern Africa. There I encountered the Malawian's lively Christian faith.

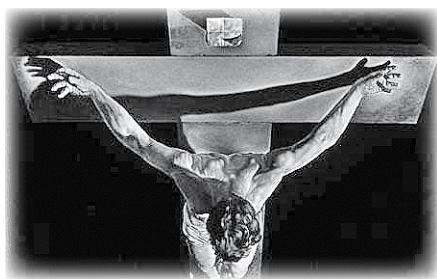
Before converting, I used to say that I was the last person on Earth who would ever become a Christian. I grew up in a family of stalwart atheists. My parents, sibling, grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins were all atheists. As a child I was taught that religion is, at best, a superstitious fairy tale and at worst an irrational, violent ideology. Still, in spite of my upbringing, my little soul sought God with all its strength and in time He drew me close. I hope this story will encourage everyone who reads it to seek God with their whole heart

and will fill with hope all who work and pray for the conversion of a loved one. I am living proof that God can pierce the heart of even the most hardened atheist.



Nothing gives me more delight than recounting the great, mysterious ways the Lord has worked in my life, but how quickly that delight turns to disappointment when I realize that no one can understand in 5 minutes the desolation of a life without the Lord: how I trod like a mill horse the same old circles of my mind—to calculate and recalculate the meaning of life, the source of truth, goodness and beauty. How desperately I sought distraction after distraction to escape the dread of despair. How vainly I tried to fill with every sin the cup only the Lord can fill. Restless is the heart, Lord, until it rests in you. And who, in 5 minutes, can understand the exalted elation in knowing Him, firmly and finally?

So, I've tried to explain it all here in hope that it reflects a glitter of the great love God holds for us. For even as I spit in the face of Lord and took willing participation in His crucifixion, from the cross He



looked down in pity, forgave and saved me. He did all this out of love for our human family. All I can

do now, looking into His face in the Eucharist, is wonder, “Why me, when I was so undeserving of grace? Why me, when I blasphemed you so many times?” Truly, His love endures forever; His mercy endures forever! So, I tell this story so all may know how good the Lord is and how much he loves us, undeserving as we are.



I grew up in a vehemently anti-religious family. My mother especially spurned the bible and disliked Christians. I think she saw only the self-righteous, judgmental, hypocritical side. Unfortunately, my entire family held such an attitude, all my brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles, cousins, and grandparents felt the same way.

Where did such animosity towards Christianity come from? It is most deeply rooted, I believe, in my grandfather on my mother's side. My grandpa grew up in Orange County, California. His family lived in that area for many generations and counted among its ancestors the first Spanish settlers to the region. Being of Spanish decent, my grandpa's entire family was Catholic.

His parents, my great-grandparents, were not devout, but still sent their children to Catholic schools. There, my grandfather learned to despise



nuns—the meanest people on earth—strict as hell as he would say. At some point in his youth, my grandfather stopped practicing the faith altogether and became an atheist.

When he was eighteen, my grandfather met my grandmother, Kathleen. She was a beautiful, elegant, loving, empathetic and perceptive woman. She was always a friend to the underdog and a lover of the poor and marginalized but shared my grandpa's distaste for religion.

My grandparents married in the War years and had their first child, my uncle David, in 1942. When my grandfather returned home, they had their second child, my mother, in 1946 and settled in Orange County, California.

I think Orange County of the 1950's was a challenging place for my grandparents to raise a family. They were atheists at a time it was dangerous to be an atheist. Always was the threat of being black-listed as a communist. They were also liberals in a place known for its virulent brand of right-wing Evangelical Christianity. They did not fit in, and, in fact, were surrounded by adherents to a dogma

they found quite repulsive. The political climate was such that they could not express themselves

THE RED MENACE IS REAL!



openly, but rather, had to pretend to be Christians for the sake of avoiding suspicion. I'm sure those long years of pretending to be something they actually found detestable probably played a big role in forming my family's strong repulsion to the Christian faith. Also

formative was this apparent marriage between the political right-wing and Christianity, to the point they became indistinguishable in their eyes. So, it was in this climate that my mother was raised an atheist and developed a potent aversion to religion.

I lament that my family never knew Christian love, but only saw their hate and condemnation. I see now how careful we Christians must be not to repel a single soul away from our dear Lord's heart.

Even though my entire family held such an attitude, growing up, all my grade-school friends were Christians. They used to tell me, with solemn gravity the torments of Hell and the necessity of reading the Bible. I listened to them trembling. So, I searched our family's bookshelf for the Holy



Bible and discovered a thick, leather-bound King James Version. I hid it under my bed to read it in secret every Sunday for fear my parents would catch me. I did a chapter per week starting from Genesis. I can't tell you how bizarre I found the text. How do these strange stories (in old English) save my soul from Hell? Once I hit Leviticus and Mosaic Law, I began to falter. What; if anything, does long-passed Jewish genealogy have to do with Jesus and Salvation? I decided to consult my Christian friends for advice. "Oh you started with that? You need to read the New Testament!" So, I did. The next Sunday, I opened up the old book with its silky paper and gold leaf to Revelations! Revelations baffles most adults; imagine an eight year old reading it in Old English! Needless to say, I got so confused I closed the book and didn't look back for many years.



So, that ended my investigation into Holy

Scripture; I just couldn't understand how these stories could help anyone! Still, my little soul reached out to God. I have vivid memory of a camping trip I took with one of my friends around the age of ten. My Dad took us up into the mountains, near a stream. I remember fishing the brown little brook and how the setting sun filled the brook with light so you could see the leafy bottom. We strung bright red salmon eggs on a brass hook and floated them downstream into pools of trout. The whole place smelled of pines. In the still of the night, amide smoldering campfires, my friend and I sat together in a tent talking quietly about God.



I was blessed to have such a friend. He taught me how to pray and told me to invite Jesus into my heart. I followed his directions with great solemnity. We whispered together, "Oh, God come and fill our hearts; Oh, Jesus fill our hearts." And we prayed like that until drifting to sleep. I never

forgot that night. I felt peace like never before and something else, a freshness, like seeing the world with new eyes. Wasn't I just the same as always? But I awakened to something hidden deep within me, and the same thing hiding deep beneath the veil of reality. What was it? What does Jesus have to do with all this? Who was Jesus? What does he have to do with Hell, Genesis, Revelations and the Republican Party and these feelings? Despite confusion, I experienced a real communion with our Lord and couldn't forget it.

From then on I tried with little-child might to hold on to this speck of faith. I made sure to pray every day and follow the Ten Commandments, but adolescence and a maturing intellect brought not only questions about God, but temptations to grave sins of lust. These dogged questions, driven by my attraction to sin, horrified me; I expended much mental effort trying to quash any religious doubt and repel from my mind sinful thoughts, but it was only a matter of time before I finally let go of my little faith. I remember the very night that I assented to disbelief. I was eleven years old. On that night, I not only abandoned faith but I also assented to grave sin. In short order, the shame of sin was swept away by powerful currents of justification, leaving only anger that I'd felt compelled to deny myself such pleasure in the first place. This self-

justified anger drove me to embrace atheism like the rest of my family. This I regarded as a kind of freedom.

I stayed an atheist throughout my teens up to my mid-twenties. I didn't think anything particularly original about God, just the usual atheist lines: God is a fantasy, created to console weak-minded people. I loved to argue with evangelists and always fantasized that they would be so moved by my impenetrable logic that they'd see the light and follow me into cultural enlightenment. But logic doesn't warm hearts.

In college, I decided to study geology to develop my "enlightenment". I highly valued science, regarding it as the only way fickle humans can know anything about the world. This undue focus on science led me into the doldrums of scientism—the belief that only scientifically verifiable claims are believable.

Atheists are thick on the ground in college, and their outspoken presence did much to embolden my secular tendencies; but college also brought a great good for my soul, for it is where met my wife, Jenny. Her moral integrity, inner strength and love-of-truth deeply attracted me. She is, to this day, a true philosopher, a lover of wisdom and goodness. Those traits, noble as they are, are



secondary to a facet of Jen which immediately drew me to her and continues to draw me to this day which I can only express this way: something about Jen makes me believe in a soul. I cannot explain it any more than that, but even in the depths of atheism I saw it.

Jenny was also a fallen-away Catholic, and though she was not faithful, she was sympathetic to faith and turned me from my most errant materialist and anti-religious inclinations.

Oh my God! Even as I cursed your name, you did so much to save me from my waywardness. On college campuses, many brave evangelists tried to talk some sense into me. How blessed I was that God sent so many of his servants! But I couldn't hear them. After arguing in circles for half an hour they'd exclaim, "You need to read the Bible!"

"Ha ha, I've read it!" I would lie.

I hated God and I hated people for their foolish belief. I raged against them! Why can't they see the light like me?! But I didn't know what the Lord meant when He said, "When the light in you is darkness, how great the darkness will be."

Looking back, God gave me so many chances. Even as I cursed Him, He tried to save me, but I turned my back and closed my ears. God sent me many signs and many servants in these long years, but I blinded myself all the more as not to hear them. But, even in my blindness I could not escape. He appeared in the depths of my intellect. I considered myself a scientific materialist atheist, and although I didn't believe in God, I still believed in other things—like beauty and morality. So, I wasn't a total nihilist; I still thought there was absolute good and evil. I couldn't explain where this conviction came from, or what it was based on, but I saw the fruit of moral relativism and it was enough to turn me off.

I think that God gives us all a strong faith in at least one aspect of him. It might be truth, beauty, morality, love, meaning or purpose. I think that even the biggest skeptic has faith in at least one of these things. He might claim to believe only what's in front of his nose, but deep down has faith that what's right is truly right, or what's beautiful is truly beautiful. To these people still holding to materialism I ask, "Do you have a better reason to believe in true beauty, goodness or meaning than to believe in God?"

So, I agreed that moral goodness is real, but we only know it through careful application of reason.

Why reason? Because I wanted to acknowledge absolute moral truth, but it's difficult to explain absolute morality in the context of materialism. How could moral truths be real if nothing but material things exist? I could think of no other way to ground it than reason. Evil is ultimately just unreasonable.

Now, if you believe in morality you have to look around and say, "Evil prevails everywhere! What is our salvation?" We're atheists here, so what's it going to be? It can't be God. We can choose the Democrats, Republicans, libertarians, feminists, objectivists, labor unions, nationalists or internationalists, individualists, communalists, communists, anarchists etc... I picked socialism as my salvation. It made sense to me at the time.



People will only be good when they are reasonable. Science is the most effective way for people to think reasonably. Therefore, a society that is scientifically organized will be the best possible society.

Because of this socialist bent I nurtured a faith in the all-saving Revolution. The coming socialist victory would violently overthrow our capitalist masters and free mankind. So, I went to secret meetings and protests and preached the good

news of dialectic materialism, but all the while, in forgotten recesses of my heart, I was searching for God. Socialism, after all, bears a certain semblance to Christianity: international revolution will restore human fraternity and solidarity; the scientifically organized society will provide for the material needs of all people; justice will prevail; the poor will be lifted up and our capitalist masters will be sent away empty. This sort of belief plunges one's mind into ends-justify-the-means morality. So, for the sake of a noble (usually imaginary) end, one could do the most depraved things.

Still, in spite of all this, I managed to follow my conscience; and so after college, my wife and I decided to join the Peace Corps to help the less fortunate. I see now how doggedly God pursued us. Through my conscience, the Lord still had a hold of me. You will see how providential was this decision to serve abroad.



The Peace Corps sent us to Malawi. It's a small country in southeast Africa. We lived in a rural village without electricity or water or any modern convenience. It's also a Christian country with

a lively faith; being an atheist is not acceptable. So,



I agreed to live a lie for 2 years and pretend to be Christian so I could better meld with the people. Of course, everyone in Malawi asks, “Well, you say you’re a Christian. What church do you go to?” But, I hadn’t thought my lie out that far!

“I am a Unitarian.” I lied.

I didn’t know any Christian denominations, so I blurted out the first one that came to mind. My mom always said that, if she were religious, she’d be a Unitarian.

Malawians: “Why don’t you ever go to church then?”

Sean: “Well, the preacher speaks Chichewa and so it’s hard to understand the sermon and besides they don’t have my church around here.”

That satisfied all but the most suspicious of them.

So, we dwelt in a village with the faithful

peasants. The people knew little of the outside world. They farmed a few acres to feed their families. The rains come once a year for three months. If they planted seeds their crops would grow and bear fruit. God is good and the devil is wicked. God lived in the sky with his son Jesus. By His hand these things all happened. As a scientist I approached the world with an eye that delved into every incomprehensible detail. How easy it is to get lost in those details and fail to see the beauty of His larger works! Fortunately for me, God did not forget me. Even as I raged and rebelled against Him, He sent help. I met a man from the village named Standwell. He was one of Jehovah's Witnesses and very devout. He was a holy man with great knowledge and love for the Lord. The first thing he asked about was faith. I told him my lie, "I'm a Unitarian."

Standwell: "Ooh! What church is that?"

(He had a high, gentle voice that sounds like a man imitating a woman.)

Sean: "It's a Christian church, but we're very accepting of different ideas."

Standwell: "Do you believe that Jesus is son of God?"

Sean: "No, no, that's not right at all. He was just a good man, a good teacher!"

I was very bad at being a Unitarian.

Standwell: “Oh, then you’re not a Christian at all! So, I think we should read the Bible together”

Sean: “No, No, I am a Christian. Look, I’m a really devout Unitarian, so I can’t read the Bible with you. I’m just overflowing with zeal for the Unitarian Faith. You want to convert me, but you’re just wasting your time. You’ll never convert me. So, for your sake, just forget it.”

But Standwell would not forget it. He found ways of worming into my life under non-religious pretenses. When I started looking for a tutor to teach me the local language (Chichewa), he saw his chance.

Standwell: “So, why can’t I teach you Chichewa?”

Sean: “Well, I guess you could teach...how much do you want per hour?”

Standwell: “Ah, brother, I can do it for you for free, but I want to teach you using the Bible.”

So, I finally submitted to this. Standwell would teach me the Bible, and I could get free language lessons. Fine. He could never convert me anyway. I’m so worldly and cultured and educated and Standwell is a simple villager. He’s never even been 50 km away from home! How could he address my rock-hard arguments against God’s existence?

Ha! That's what I thought. I was so smug. I didn't know that the Lord makes the wisdom of the world foolish, for dear Standwell was armed with the Holy Spirit!

So, time went on in this way. I lived with my wife in the village of Nthondo. I helped the poor Africans graft fruit trees. My wife worked at the local health center. We ate our bread and beans



Jenny playing with the children

and kept a garden. The sunset silhouetted the flat-topped acacia trees on the ridge across the valley and I'd bury my hands into the garden soil. The smells of smoke and supper wafted in the air and mingled with evening songs of mothers calling for their children to come home from play. For the first time in our lives, we were surrounded by God's creation—the maize gardens, mango trees, simple homes made from mud and grass, the bush



and swamps they called *dambos*.

It's in this silent kingdom that we hear the voice of the Lord. I remember one bright day, looking up into the yellow face of a sunflower and the sun had risen up above sending down its warm rays. The sky was so blue; it was the very essence of blue and a fat bumble bee was busy rifling through the pollen-thick-stigmas. At that moment, looking into the face of that sunflower, I gasped. I could think of nothing else than, "Oh my God! Oh my God! How could this be!? How could this be!?" The fact of existence seems impossible! Why should any of this exist? And why should it be so good and so beautiful and so glorious?!



At that moment, all of the swirling glory of reality filled me with awe and wonder, and I experienced an old curious longing: the longing to express gratitude, not just for my life but for The Creation. However, as an atheist this gratitude left me positively befuddled. To whom am I grateful? Whom do I appreciate? You can give thanks to your friend for buying you dinner, or for a spouse who stood with you through tough times, but if you find a \$100 bill on the ground, you have no sense of gratitude. You can sing for joy about your good luck, but luck is all it is, you cannot appreciate the one who lost his bill. To an atheist, life and existence is the lost bill: a series of fortunate accidents that one may rejoice in but can't be grateful for. And this breath-taking beauty charged with grandeur—is it only dumb luck? Don't we atheists take the world for granted?

So, why does this atheist look at the sunflower with gratitude? Maybe I did not really know what I believed in. How do you know what you believe anyway? It's not such a trivial question, actually. I can't really think of the answer. Maybe hidden in my depths, I did believe in God, but had wrapped myself in cynicism. Or, perhaps, I so surrounded myself with the disillusioned, with the hard-hearted, hard-nosed skeptics, that I could not assent to my own belief. Perhaps, that seed of faith

had never died. Perhaps, I'd only hid it away—and now it stirred.

In retrospect, so many things came together to lift me out of despair. Before I could believe in the benevolent love of our Lord, He had to batter down the intellectual walls I built around my heart. He did this in the most providential way, by drawing my attention to a random book on a shelf. The book was Carl Jung's *Symbols of Transformation*. I can't say at all what inspired me to pick it up and read, but it left a profound impression on me. Jung's brilliance amazed me, and his deep respect for Christianity surprised me. How could such an intellectual giant harbor such admiration for a foolish thing like religion? He had a passage that stung me to the core. Regarding the story Jesus and Nicodemus, Jung wrote, "If you only believe in concrete scientific truths, then you'll never know anything but banalities." That sentence really made me think. Goodness, meaning, wisdom, beauty, all



the most important truth in the world is hidden from the eyes of science. How could science then be the last word, the end-all be-all?

Jung opened my mind to an unsettling possibility: religion might be true but I just don't understand it, and just because I don't understand it, doesn't mean it's not true. After all, God is infinite and mysterious. How could I ever understand him? He wouldn't be God if I understood completely.

So, at the same time Jung was opening my mind, Tolstoy and Dostoevsky were working on me as well. I read the Great Russian novels: *War and Peace*, *The Brothers Karamazov*, *Anna Karenina*. They brought me face to face with a Christianity that I'd never seen before—profound and mysterious. How could such brilliant authors believe in fairy tales? Tolstoy further broke my narrow-minded outlook through his story of Levin (from *Anna Karenina*). Levin is a hyper-rationalist who is moved by the simple faith of his beloved wife. There's this wonderful scene where he's walking through the countryside. He's just married the love of his life and had his first baby boy. He's happy, and the country is so still and quiet. The clouds are slowly, steadily flowing above him. Looking up into the sky, he realizes there is something beyond what he's seeing. He knows, but can't understand. In that moment of solitude

and intimacy with God, he finds his faith.



Levin and Kitty

It reminds me of the prophet Elijah ascending Mount Carmel, waiting for the Lord to come. A mighty wind blows, but the Lord is not there; then a great fire passes, but the Lord is not there either; then an earthquake shakes the mountain, but still the Lord's not there. Finally Elijah hears a whisper



from out of the silence and knows this is God calling him. It was the same for me in Malawi—a world free from electronic distractions. I didn't need an earthquake or column of fire to recognize Gods voice, but a simply a moment of silence. It is amazing that, in America, I never gave myself an opportunity to simply sit in silence.

So, while all this is going on—there is another important change occurring: I'm realizing my own essential moral nature. My wife and I were the only white people in the village. That draws a lot of unwanted attention. Everyone also thinks that we're rich, and so they don't feel very bad about stealing from us. So, people stared at us, harassed us, pretended to be our friends just to get money; they stole from us and charged us more at the market. After a while, I started getting tired of it all. Now, in the village, there are no police. Social norms don't apply to us, so for the first time, I was placed in a situation without any real external controls on my behavior.

In America, I always thought I was a good person. Meaning, I stayed out of trouble. However, I started to realize, all that time I was just acting in my own best interests. Once social controls melted away, I became an animal. When the Africans harassed me, I pushed them and shouted in their faces. I got angry, violent, belligerent. People feared

me, and I loved the feeling of power over them! One day someone in the village stole from me, I considered burning his maize gardens in retribution. I was also tempted on a regular basis to cheat on my wife, since so many of the African



women wanted nothing more than a rich, white husband. Wrath and lust consumed me, and I realized I was doing evil, but I saw no reason to deny my passions. Why not do what I want, and hurt who I want and take what I want if no negative consequences come to me? Because it is unreasonable? Who cares?

I didn't know it yet, but I was a slave, a captive of my own sin. The waters closed in around me, because I could not deny myself. I thought I was a good person. I was good—good at judging, rebuking and condemning others. But, when the tables turned to suffer temptation, I could not resist. When people angered me, I cursed and beat them. Even small children were not safe from my wrath. If I felt inferior, I belittled some unfortunate victim. If someone stole from me, they would regret the day. My cruelty had no limit, my lust no end. I thought freedom was doing what I wanted! The

waters closed in around me. I did what I wanted, all the time. I had no way of refusing my desires. If there is no God anything is permissible. Why not do what you want, if there are no consequences? Right and wrong are just abstractions without power and substance. I rationalized everything. Drop by drop, the waters closed in around me and I began to realize I was drowning. I was drowning and there was no help and no way out.

Then I saw a glimmer of hope. Suddenly, I could finally see Jesus' light. For the Lord's light shone through Standwell, my dear evangelizer. In that time of desperation, I turned my face towards God's holy temple, and He answered me. From the depths He lifted me up. I see now, God needed to show me how morally bankrupt I was so that I'd turn to Him. In His benevolent providence, He left me a way out.

At that time, I was doing my language lessons with Standwell. While I spiraled out of control into greater and greater wickedness, Standwell stood well-grounded, stable, loving and committed to good. He had a wonderful, quiet, living faith, which I could not help but compare to my despairing nihilism and intellectual pomposity: rotten fruit.

In the midst of all this evil ruining and controlling my life, I was quietly looking for some

salvation. More and more I looked forward to my Bible lessons with Standwell. His gracious presence and great love for scripture comforted me more than anything else. I longed to have what he had. Walking home from Standwell's in the early evening, through the path that cut the jungle, I'd stare into the stars and demand that God give me a sign that proves that He was there. When I didn't receive the sign that I wanted, when I wanted it, I would say, "There! That proves that nothing's up there!" But still, in the recesses of my heart, I didn't stop looking and asking for that sign.

Finally, Standwell began to teach me the Gospels. It was beautiful. I used to read the 8th chapter of John's Gospel, again and again:

"Where are your accusers? Has no one condemned you?"

'No one, Lord.'

"Neither do I condemn you: go and sin no more."

I thought it was the most beautiful thing I'd ever read. How did an uneducated carpenter from a Podunk village like Galilee come to hold such profound wisdom and beauty?

Then walking home under the stars, with maize gardens, the setting sun, the stillness, the words of Jesus were stirring, penetrating deeper and deeper.

Everything beautiful in my life came from God and Jesus. Everything hideous I wrought with my own hands.

Standwell's evangelization was making everything bubble and foment inside of me. It was coming to a head. I felt I was at a fork in the road. Ever since I was a child I had prayed, intermittently, to God. Not every day, but once in a while. Even as an atheist, I felt compelled to check the heavens now and again just to make sure they were empty. I'd done this for years. Then Standwell came along and told me the Good News. Now I was ready to listen, and able to hear. Jesus pierced the heart as hard as diamond! He melted the heart as cold as ice! Finally I considered, "Maybe there is a God."

So, I checked the heavens again and again. Nope, the heavens are still empty. I asked, again and again for a sign. Sorry, no sign will come. Finally, I said, "OK enough is enough, if there was a God, he'd have answered by now." I decided that I'd really given Christ a fair chance, and he'd let me down. So I thought I'd close the book on Him forever, but something kept me from shutting the door.

One day, I'd just completed a Bible lesson with Standwell. We were arguing about a certain passage. I loved to argue. We were discussing

Jesus' greatest commandment: to love God and neighbor. Standwell was saying that we love God by following his commandments. I was saying that we love God first and finally and that love makes us obedient.

So, we parted with Standwell's usual line, "Go in peace, not in pieces! Good night, brother." I went my way walking home. It was dusk. I liked to take a shortcut in the valley through the bush and fields of maize. It was a real balmy night, and in the distance you could see the silent thunderstorm light up horizons of purple clouds. A heavy mist sagged in the nooks of the garden thick with fog. Fireflies twinkled glints of green. All was silent, just my steady footsteps. But my mind raced wildly, thinking of Christ's words, "Love God with all your heart and all your mind and all your strength and all your being."

As soon as I arrived home, in the darkness of that night, I fumbled for a light—an old wax candle and box of matches. Suddenly, sizzling phosphor of a cheap match illuminated the pages of my Bible laid out on our iron-red table. I tore through silky pages to contemplate the passage again—the greatest commandment.

I'd had enough flirting with God; I'd truly had had enough. If I'm going to be an atheist I ought to

make up my mind and live like there is no God and stop dancing with these little sentimental notions of Christ. On the other hand, if it's possible that there is a God, then what could matter besides that chance? What else could possibly matter than that Great-and-possible-God? If it's possible then I need to seek him with my whole heart, my whole soul, my whole being, with all my strength. I paused and thumbed the silky pages of scripture and thought about the words of Jesus, words that sizzled and blazed in my heart like a refiner's fire-searing truth.

There is something great here: Truth, beautiful and hard as crystal. There is a Love here that lights worlds ablaze. I need to seek it—beyond seeking it— I must run it down like a blood hound. No, atheism is not for me; I spit it out.



At that moment of resolve, Jesus threw off his disguise, and said, “Here I AM!” This is when Jesus, I believe, communed with me.

I had opened my bible to a random page to find the verse of the greatest commandment. Now, you know how in your mind you hear yourself talk? I heard myself thinking. I was thinking to myself,

“Now what chapter and verse is it again?” Then, I heard another voice in my head, like another dialogue box pop up. Now, you know what your own thoughts are and what they say. You have a certain pattern of internal speech and style. This was unlike anything I had ever heard in my own head, and it said, “The words you seek are before you.” It was strange, and I felt sort of baffled and addlepat. It was like I was trying to think, but something was drowning my thoughts out. I tried to think again, and the same sentence sprung into my mind, “the words you seek are before you.” I looked down and, sure enough, I had my thumb on the very verse I was looking for! I just about died, my heart jumped into my mouth! I know that doesn’t sound like much of a miracle, but this is the *real* miracle: another life came into my heart at that moment, and he has dwelt there ever since.

This is the gift of faith. It is not an unquestioning, irrational belief, but flesh-and-blood life. It’s His Life: the life of the Resurrected Jesus and he lives in you. We cannot believe; we cannot have faith. It’s His life that enters you and He believes perfectly as the obedient son. At that moment I was changed, in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye. I was changed and I believed.

After that day, I began to pray in earnest, and read Holy Scripture in earnest. Miracles flowed in,

a thousand graces. Yes, grace flowed in like waters from the temple that wet the parched sand.

My childhood was hard, and that had left many open wounds on my heart. I was bullied every day through middle school and high school. For 20 years I harbored great anger over this. My suffering came to an end, abruptly and completely. My parents' divorce also left so much pain and many wounds which festered in my heart for decades. But Jesus simply blew it away, leaving only love and forgiveness. Resentments I fostered so long against my family members, spoiled relationships. Jesus swept them away in a minute. Pain that lasted for years was now only a faint memory.



Lazarus, come forth!

I'd also been having a bitter ongoing argument with my wife that was driving us apart. I prayed to Jesus about what to say, and he told me, exactly what to say, word for word. In the middle of my

prayer, my wife made some cruel jab to insult me. But Jesus gave me grace. I looked at her, and for a few seconds I felt everything that she felt, all of her hurt, all of her pain. I didn't even hear what she said; I just felt pitying, sorrowful love for her. Then, I repeated to my wife, what Jesus told me to say, verbatim. I badly didn't want to say it, because I was afraid of what it would mean, but I was faithful to His word. She broke down and wept and embraced me and everything was healed. Months of stinging wounds, healed in a moment. It was beautiful. What graces! This is the gift of faith, He lives through me, with me and in me and I dwell in him and He dwells in me.

From the many addictions ravaging my life, He saved me. I offered them up, and He took them away. They never troubled me again. Like His triumphant entrance into Jerusalem, Jesus entered my heart in glory! By that time I finally realized: Jesus lives, God lives and I need to follow Him, although I do it very imperfectly.

To this day, my dear evangelizer, Standwell Mphenzi, does not realize that he had converted a hardened atheist to the Christian faith. He thought I was a Christian to begin with and never learned the truth. So, I want to remind my Christian brothers and sisters not to be discouraged in spreading the Good News. We often do not see the

fruits of our labor.

As my Peace Corps service came to a close, I was coming home, in more ways than one. When I finally got back to America, Ronda, my grandmother-in-law was the only Christian I knew, because I had hated Christians for so long. So, she directed me into the Catholic Church, and I started to go every day to pay homage to Jesus who had saved me.



Welcome home!

COMING HOME

It amazes me how God not only weaves these epic dramas in the course of human history, like the Exodus, but also tells the same story in the heart of every faithful individual. How one day we were slaves, but were saved, and how He worked so many miracles and led us to freedom, but we faltered and doubted. Though we'd seen His mighty deeds, we looked back and wondered, "Is this the right way to go?" "Our sojourn begins with hesitation. We wait for a sign, but no sign comes. Some wander much longer than 40 years, but do finally arrive at the Promised Land.

After a year of waiting and 10 months of the Rite of Initiation in the Catholic Church in Ann Arbor, Michigan where I was studying for my Ph.D. in geology, my day to enter the Church had finally come. I remember feeling nervous, driving to St. Thomas with my wife and grandmother-in-law, Ronda. We were headed west, and the sun was setting in front of us. I could barely see the road, it was so blinding. It was a quiet ride. Private worlds of thought absorbed each of us. Suddenly Ronda broke the silence, "Do you see pink around the sun?"

"No" We answered in unison.

“The sun looks like a Eucharistic host. You don’t see that?”

“No, well I mean, it always looks like a host in that it’s white and round.”

“Well, it’s not usually white; it’s more kind of yellow.”



We both sort of nodded in incredulity, and the ride continued in silence. I was so nervous; my mind raced trying to wrap itself around the enormity of event about to occur. What does it mean to be born into Eternal Life? I wonder if it’s not unlike a man led to the electric chair. He keeps asking himself, “What does it mean to die?”

Once we arrived at church, I joined the other catechumens in the parish hall. We huddled in the middle of a dimly-lit corridor. The deacon who’d

led us through RCIA was there too, in full vesture. He spoke to us final words of encouragement and wrung his hands. We'd waited so long for this night. Some of the older catechumens had waited a lifetime searching for Him.

The simple actions we'll go through and the simple words we'll say hold so much meaning. And yet in the midst of its enormity you realize there are many practical things you have to do. 'Father says this, you say that... and after he baptizes you, meet Linda and she will take you back here and you'll find a change of clothes in the sacristy...and then you hold the candle and give it back to your sponsor after he lights it...Didn't the Deacon fit you for an alb!?' There were so many little things to remember, and in the end, the larger question of "what does it all mean?" went unanswered. We were like young lovers that marry and only thirty years later realize what their vows were about.

The time had come; the bells rung. Deacon bowed our heads and for a final blessing and we processed out to a plaza in front of the church to the vigil fire. Parishioners crowded around the yellow flames forming a cloistered circle of glowing-orange faces solemn but beaming. We made way for Fr. Bill accompanied by an army of priests, deacons and altar servers. Father blessed the fire and lit the paschal candle. Lifting the massive

candle high above our heads he cried, “*Lumen Christi!*” (The Light of Christ) crowd resounded “*Deo gratias!*” (Thanks be to God) and we followed him through the portals of the church to take our place in the pews.

The liturgy passed in a haze. The familiar hymns and motions took on new meaning. Fr. Bill read the prayers, “...for in your paschal sacrifice you have freed us from the fetters of sin.” My heart twisted and eyes watered. “I was once a slave...but You have set me free.” The image of St. Josephine Bakhita, came to mind—in her habit, the little, black sister with a wide smile. She held up her hands in triumphant blessing; the chains of slavery, broken, hung at the wrist.

Time came for baptism. We stood in line waiting our turn. Each catechumen knelt in front of Fr. Bill. Lovingly, he invoked the Holy Spirit, “I baptize you in the name of the Father...” He poured water, “... and the Son...” more water, “... And the Holy Spirit.” with a final douse. Then the choir explodes into jingling song: “You have been baptized! Indeed you have put on Christ! Alleluia! Alleluia!”

It was finally my turn. I thought I’d be weeping. I thought I’d crumple into a ball and cry. But nothing of the sort happened. I knelt in front of

our dear Father and opened my arms. “Sean, I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit!” The warm water bathed me in glory. I grasped the hand of Fr. Bill, exuding joy and warm lovingness, and rose to foot a new creation. The choir jingled, “You have been baptized! Indeed you have put on Christ! Alleluia! Alleluia!”



Philip baptizes the Etheopian

I felt nothing but joy! As I turned into the sacristy, I saw my catechist. We were all smiles. “I thought I would cry, but I just feel so happy.” We warmly embraced, and I went to change. In the dressing room, everyone was exuberant, cheering, laughing and hugging. We put on snow-white albs and processed out in front of the altar—candles in hand. The congregation looked at us with such joy! You could positively feel it. I had on a permanent smile.

Father came with the chrism oil, and began to confirm us one by one. He called us by our confirmation names. There was a Martha, Mary, Luke, Lazarus, Nicodemus, Francis and John of the Cross. I chose, St. Josephine Bakhita, an African woman saint who had been a slave but found Christ and became a religious sister in Italy. I chose her because I found the faith in Africa, and once myself been a slave of sin, but had been set free.



Awaiting my turn for confirmation, I felt so strong and confident, like the saints were standing there welling up our hearts on the fount of Love. I looked down at my hands, hands that had wrought such sin. Now these hands will do God's work.

My turn had come; taking both palms, Father, slathered and rubbed oil on my forehead, "Be sealed with the Gift of the Holy Spirit!" He said. It felt so warm, and smelled so warm like cinnamon spice. For the first time, I felt fearless in my faith, no longer stricken with timid earthly cares.

We filed back to our seats to complete the liturgy of the Eucharist. I knew these words, so many times I'd heard them at daily mass, but now

they really meant something. Soon I'd receive the Savior I'd longed for so long!

Then it struck me! On the cusp of salvation, the great abuse I'd heaped on my Savior, my Lord, suddenly burdened me! What sorrow entered my heart! For decades I piled insult upon his loving head. A thousand times I spit in his face and rejected Him. My dear one now I cherish, how I abused You!

As the Eucharist liturgy unfolded, He revealed the mysteries of His deep love for us. Indeed, it was I who crucified him! A willing persecutor nailed Him to the cross. Even as I blasphemed His holy name, in the midst of His Passion He saved his tormentors. All I could think was, "Why me? Why did you save me from my own undoing? Wouldn't it be fair to let me wreck the havoc I wrecked on my life?"

The faithful gathered to receive communion.

My questions burned on, "I unraveled in despair, but you gave me hope. Why? I was torn to pieces with insult, and you gave me pardon. Why? I stumbled in darkness, but you lit my way. Why? You were always there, even as I cursed you. Why did you forgive, someone so undeserving?"

It was my turn to take communion. Fr. Bill presented His blessed body. I took and ate. "Why

did you save the undeserving?” Then Christ’s answer rushed over me like an ocean unleashed, “Because I loved you!” The choir trumpeted triumph; the congregation resounded “Alleluia!” And all my broken heart could do was echo “Alleluia! Alleluia!”

For many months before first communion I worried, “what if I feel nothing? What if holy communion just tastes like bread and wine?” I’d fantasize about miracles where first communion tasted like real flesh and blood. I didn’t know what God had in store for me. Looking back I ask myself—what did His blood and body taste like? That’s like asking someone hit by a train what color the caboose was. I can’t remember anything but an overwhelming sense of Jesus’ divine love.

As for the whole experience—the tremendous grace of receiving three sacraments in one night, no words suffice. I can say it was great, wonderful, incredible, but those fall short. It was an image of the Joy of Heaven which exceeds all earthly joy, where the soul is floodlit by light. For a few minutes I felt a sliver of God’ Love for me. It was so overwhelming that I sobbed and wept out of pure elation.

EPILOGUE



fter four years of being a Christian and three years in full communion with the Church I have never regretted or second-guessed my decision. I'm constantly aware of His Life within mine and that is an endless source of joy for me. The joy of Christ is true joy; it is not the fleeting happiness I knew before conversion. That happiness was always sullied by the dread of its departure. Secular happiness is a shadow of eternal joy. For all those seeking God, I beg you, do not stop knocking! He will open the door.



Not long after entering the Church, my wife and I had our first child, Teresa. In the same week Teresa was baptized, my wife, Jenny, decided to go back to confession. She'd been away from the Church for fifteen years. Now she's back. All thanks be to God, whose mercy endures forever.



Sean, Jenny and Teresa

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*Blessed Nicolas Steno,
a founding father of geology,
pray for us.*