

Out of Darkness
Conversion of Patty Patrick Bonds

“I say unto you, unless you turn and become like children, you will not enter the kingdom of Heaven.” Mt. 18:3

It was late September 2000. I sat at my computer under the dim light of my desk lamp, typing an e-mail. My family was asleep. I was alone with God and with the realization that I was about to bring my life, as I had known it, to a sudden and complete end. I had prayed for the right words with the right spirit to explain briefly to a number of my friends what had transpired over the last six months. The e-mail read . . .

Dear Friends,

Gen. 12:1 & 4a

"Now the Lord said to Abram, 'Go forth from your country, and from your relatives and from your father's house, to the land which I will show you;' so Abram went forth as the Lord had spoken to him."

I understand in a new way how Abram must have felt when God came along and told him that life was about to change drastically. It is a very difficult thing to walk away from everything that has been familiar and comforting in life and to follow God into unknown territory, alone, with His words echoing in your ears (Is. 30:21) and His guiding hand in yours. This is where I have been for several months now, and the time has come to make it known to all of you.

For the past six months I have been studying the Catholic faith. I have found that "to be deep in history is to cease to be Protestant." (J. H. Newman) The discoveries I have made have been so amazing and such a surprise to me. It has been the most difficult, painful, confusing, enlightening, exciting, glorious six months of my life. If I had not had the previous five years of walking closely with God, learning to hear His voice and to respond in obedience even when it hurts, and learning that discipleship means death to self and to every form of strength and comfort outside of Him, I would never have been able to recognize His leading and to follow Him down this path. John. 10:27

I am thankful for all of you at Northwest Community Church and those friends from other churches who have been my friends and faith family. I love you all and hope that we can remain close. I will not be severing relationships. If this occurs, it will have to be the choice of others. I will not engage in arguments. I have watched too many of those, and have come to the firm belief that such arguments and debates grieve the Lord.

I am attending Church and classes at St. Helen's Parish. I have resigned from Northwest Community Church. My husband and family are supportive of this decision. They presently wish to remain at NCC, and I may be coming with them at times, but St. Helen's is my Church home now.

God bless you all.

In Christ,

Patty Bonds

I read it over, prayed over it, and read it again. Now I sat silently with my heart beating rapidly and my hand trembling on the mouse. I asked God for His strength and comfort as I clicked "Send."
"There goes my life, Lord. There goes my family, my reputation, my ministry, my identity, and more than likely, my friends. For all I know, this may end my marriage. I need you, Lord. Hold me close."

“Saved” At Six

I was raised in a Baptist family, the daughter of a Baptist pastor. My earliest memories were of sitting quietly on the front pew while my father led the singing and my mother played the organ. My mother and I sat together and absorbed my father’s preaching. I knew the Bible stories from Sunday School by heart.

One Sunday in October of 1962, not long after my sixth birthday, we had a guest speaker for Revival meetings at our church – a fire-and-brimstone preacher whose vivid description of hell frightened me. Suddenly I realized that when Jesus came to die for sinners, that included me! I was in need of a savior.

At the conclusion of the sermon, my father closed the service with an invitation to anyone who had not come forward to stop at the door on their way out and tell him that they had decided that tonight was the night they wanted to give their lives to Christ and be “saved.” I had been embarrassed to go forward at the altar call, but when the service was over I made a beeline for my father who was standing at the back door shaking hands with people. I walked up to him and said quietly, “Tonight is the night, Dad.” He knew right away what I meant, so he abandoned the crowd and took my hand.

We went to the front pew of the church and talked. He asked me a few questions to see if I knew what I was doing, and then he gave me the words to pray a sinner’s prayer. It went something like this: “Dear Heavenly Father, thank you for sending Jesus to die for my sins. I know that I am a sinner and that I need a savior. Please forgive my sins, come into my heart and save me for Jesus’ sake. Make me the kind of person you want me to be. Thank you for saving me. In Jesus’ name, Amen.” I prayed along with my father and then the hugging and tears began.

Two months after I prayed to receive Jesus, our family was blessed with an addition. I spent the evening with my schoolteacher while my mother and father went to the hospital for the delivery. That evening we got the call from my father, and he told me I had a little brother and that his name was James Robert.

The next summer my father baptized me at a neighboring church. I had been taught as a Baptist, I viewed my baptism purely as a gesture of obedience that had no effect on my salvation. Eternal life came instead from the act of placing my faith in God – after that moment I believed I could never lose my salvation no matter what I did. All my baptism did was fulfill Christ’s command and make me wet.

Growing up anti-Catholic

I first heard of the Catholic Church when I was in grade school. I had a friend at school that came over to play at our house. She taught me to play “Go Fish” with cards that my parents didn’t let me play with. We hid them in the shed. She taught me how to listen to modern music on the transistor radio. Before that lesson I thought there was only one station on the radio: the local Christian station.

I am not sure how my parents realized that my new friend was opening up a new world for me, but they put a sudden stop to our friendship. One of the reasons they gave was that she was Catholic. I remember my mother explaining that Catholics believed they had to work their way to heaven, that they prayed to statues, and that they said the same prayers over and over like pagans. She was particularly critical of the Pope and the idea that a man on earth would claim to be the head of the Church. She said that Catholics did not think for themselves; they let the Pope think for them. They were not even allowed to read the Bible for themselves! She told me that some children throw up when they take first communion because it makes them sick to think about eating Jesus’ flesh. I could see the point. It was strange and sickening to think about eating someone’s flesh. She explained that the Pope didn’t let women decide how many children they were going to have because he wanted lots of Catholics to be born. She said that Catholic women had to have one baby after another until they were either worn out or dead. What kind of people were these Catholics anyway? How could they believe such things?

During this same time my father was preaching a series of sermons on the book of Revelation. These sermons were captivating and I looked forward to each Sunday evening’s installment. I remember him saying that the Whore of Babylon referred to the Roman Catholic Church and that the anti-Christ was the head of the Catholic Church, the Pope. I accepted that belief and from that day on I saw anything Catholic as evil.

As the daughter of a Baptist minister, I grew up in a home where theology, the Bible, and an intense emphasis on “faith alone” salvation was deeply woven into the fabric our family’s life. I entered adulthood firmly convinced that, as a born-again, Bible-believing Baptist Christian, I had the whole truth. Period. Catholics, I had been taught and had come to believe, most definitely did not have the truth. And nothing could have convinced me otherwise. It was us against them.

Along side my very religious upbringing I also endured the horrors of sexual abuse from my pastor/father. The man who was my spiritual authority and my father betrayed my trust at both levels and left me devastated and forever changed. My mother cautioned me never to talk to my friends about my “special” relationship with my father because they would think there was something wrong with it. When I started to show signs of emotional problems, I was told they could not afford counseling for me so I needed to just straighten up.

In my early twenties I tried Christian counseling. I found it less than effective. Eventually I just put the thought of recovery out of my mind. I was who I was and there was nothing I could do about it. I was tired of hoping someone could help me make sense of what I had lived through, so I decided I would go to my grave with my secret.

Into Calvinism and counseling

I became Mrs. Richard Bonds in 1982. In 1985 Richard and I had our first child; a daughter, Kimberly Anne. She was such a joy to us, that we immediately wanted another. Sarah Nichole was born in 1986 followed by Esther Daniella in 1989.

Having children gave us something to focus on beside the disastrous state of our marriage. From the very beginning of our marriage, Richard and I had struggled. Each of us had issues from our past that crippled our ability to form a true bond as a married couple. We had been in and out of counseling of several types over the years and I had very little hope that things would ever change.

In 1992 we left the Southern Baptist Church that my family had attended for many years. My brother, James had left two years earlier for a Reformed church [Endnote 1]. James had shared with our family the virtues of Reformed theology, as he saw them, and Richard and I quickly grew more Calvinist in our views. We found ourselves arguing with other members of our Baptist church about issues like predestination and free will. We came to have a very different perspective on life and evangelism. We also felt we needed to be somewhere where we would be deeper in the Word of God than we were as Southern Baptists.

I asked my brother James for his recommendation on which churches in our area we should try. He suggested Northwest Community Church. Most of the elders and members there were of a Calvinist persuasion. We took his advice and visited that church. We immediately felt more at home. Our senior pastor was more of a Bible teacher than a preacher. He taught the Bible using an overhead projector and outlines that he'd hand out to the congregation each Sunday. We spent months going verse by verse through different books of the Bible.

Yet even as Richard and I settled into our new church home, we began to suffer ever-increasing marital strife. The scars I carried from the trauma of my childhood were affecting our relationship. I reluctantly agreed to speak with a counselor recommended by our pastor. Along with her late husband, this woman had spent twenty years helping others. With their unique, biblical approach to counseling – a “discipleship methodology” – they had successfully tackled just about every kind of problem. I wanted my husband fixed and I was willing to do whatever it took to get that. But I had never told Richard or our Pastor about my relationship with my father; that I was not willing to do.

In my bitterness I was ready to quit before we even began, but I agreed to tell her about my marital woes. She listened for a while and then spoke to me about my own sinful responses to the suffering in my life. She told me that as Christians we are called to suffer; that our suffering brings about growth and holiness. She told me that God can take the suffering of my life and make something beautiful of it, but only if I surrendered it to Christ and gave thanks in the midst of my pain. Being Protestant, she had no concept of the beautiful Catholic understanding of suffering. I later learned that I could join my own suffering to that of Christ and offer it to Him in union with His own sacrifice and be a coworker with Him in the saving of souls.

Her words gave me hope that perhaps God had not failed me. I left with a clearer view of my own sinfulness and rebellion against God. I also left with the hope that God was not done with me. The following months brought me spiritual challenges I never thought I could face. They also brought

deep healing, as God poured out His grace on my life and brought me peace. He gave Richard and me the tools we needed to begin the process of healing our marriage; if only we would use them.

Shades of Catholicism in “discipling”

I learned things while studying this discipleship methodology that would later pave my way home to Rome. For example, we used confessors to assist in the process of healing. We were taught to make a thorough examination of conscience: not just what we did or didn't do, but what our motivations were, what our attitudes were, how we tried to control situations or people, how we responded to the sin of others in sinful ways, etc. We learned to delve into relationships or chronic sin situations and dig sin out by the roots. We made a detailed list of these sins, and in the presence of the counselor (or “discipler”) confessed them to God one by one. I found that this method for coming to terms with our personal sin and our attitudes toward others to be deeply effective.

The disciplers were constantly amazed at the liberating effect of this method. It was apparent that confessing sin before a witness, someone older and more mature in the faith, was powerfully effective in breaking patterns of sin and freeing people from persistent guilt.

God in his infinite wisdom knew that left to our own devices we would deceive ourselves into believing that right was wrong and wrong was right unless we had accountability and authority involved in our examination of conscience and our confession of sin. I came to appreciate the power of confession of sin to a brother. I was yet to learn the grace of confession of sin to one who had been commissioned by Christ and his Church to forgive those sins in Jesus' name and to pronounce the beautiful words of absolution over me.

Another thing I was taught through this methodology was that true Christians live lives of obedience and loving service. Belief alone was not evidence of salvation – obedience was the mark of a true Christian [Endnote 2]. This was a new concept for me. It revolutionized my view of salvation. I no longer saw faith alone as the point of salvation. It was no longer a matter of mental assent, but of unconditional surrender to Christ, selfless love of others, rejection of sin, and following in Jesus' footsteps – in our relationships, in our conduct, and in our thoughts.

My discipleship training taught me to live in the presence of God and to obey His prompting. I learned to trust God as I obeyed Him. I stepped out in faith and obeyed His commands even when it was extremely difficult. As He showed Himself faithful. I grew to love my Abba more than my own life. The more I obeyed Him the more I loved Him, and the more I grew to know Him. (John 14:21) He was as close as my own breath. I lived in a state of glorious fellowship with the Lord. Life was sweet. I was Abba's little girl.

My brother makes a name for himself

In the preceding years, my brother James had become deeply involved in studying theology and had for some time engaged in Protestant apologetics, focusing his conversion efforts on Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses. After some prodding from some former Catholics he knew, he turned his attention to the Catholic Church. Understandably, we were all proud of James as he sought to spread the message of Reformed Protestantism to Catholics, and to show them that Roman Catholicism did not represent the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

By 1998, he had earned a doctorate in Protestant apologetics and had written a number of books attacking Catholicism. He regularly engaged in debates with nationally-known Catholics, including Tim Staples, Fr. Mitch Pacwa, Fr. Peter Stravinskis, Robert Sungenis, and even with the editor of the Surprised by Truth series, Patrick Madrid.

Even before he had grown prominent, I had listened attentively to the post-debate conversations James had with our parents at family dinners. I heard from him how this or that Catholic had attempted to defend the Catholic Church's teachings from the Bible.

Theologically, I agreed with his arguments against the Catholic Church, but I didn't enjoy the intensity and rancor of those debates. I found them to be an occasion of sin for those on both sides. Tempers flared easily, and I just didn't see that arguing changed hearts. I preferred to spread my anti-Catholic beliefs by sharing my version of the Gospel with my children and my friends, and by living my life in love of God and in obedience to Him.

Those darn Irish Catholics

In the spring of 2000 my oldest daughter Kimberly expressed an interest in learning more about our Scottish/Irish heritage, so we decided to go to the Scottish Highland Games in Mesa, Ariz. It was wonderful. The sound of bagpipes filled the air; Highland dancers defied gravity in competition and exhibition; genealogy experts helped us trace our family roots back to the old country. We learned about our clans and septs.

What a glorious day it was! It gave us both a strong sense of belonging. As we left the festivities that evening we decided to investigate the Irish side of our heritage the following month at the St. Patrick's Day Parade in Phoenix.

As the parade began, a car carrying the Catholic Bishop of Phoenix drove by; shortly after that, a retired priest who was obviously loved and honored by the Irish community. Then came the Knights of Columbus in full regalia. It was a "Who's Who" of Catholic life in Phoenix. I felt out of place. Why did these Irish have to be so, so Catholic?

At the end of the parade came the star of the show: St. Patrick himself, dressed as a Catholic Bishop, complete with staff and what looked like a fish-shaped hat. I had been told somewhere in the past that the miters worn by bishops represented a pagan fish god. The sight of them always made my skin crawl.

I wondered how much truth there was in the legends about St. Patrick. When I got home that evening, I did some research on the internet. I expected to find mythical tales about him sending all the snakes into exile in England; instead I found sites that treated him seriously, as though he were an actual historic figure.

One caught my eye: "The Confessions of St. Patrick." I thought it probably contained some juicy gossip about St. Patrick that the Irish might not want us to know. But instead I discovered a

Christian man of God who walked humbly with the Lord and who knew Him in a person way as I had come to know Him. I discovered in St. Patrick a brother, a kindred spirit.

But how could a pagan Catholic Bishop know the Lord Jesus Christ the way I did? How could there be this unity of spirit between St. Patrick, a Catholic, and me, a Bible-believing Protestant? At that moment, the Holy Spirit awakened in me the need to know and understand the Catholic faith.

Friends help break down my resistance

I was amazed and not a little concerned to notice that over the next few months the Holy Spirit began a gradual process of warming me up to Catholicism. I had been raised so anti-Catholic that He had to break down formidable walls of prejudice before I could take a sincere, objective look at the Faith. God also started preparing my heart through music. My husband bought me a couple of CD's by an Irish singer, who was Catholic and whose songs reflected the rich Catholic heritage of Ireland. Normally I would have considered these CD's an unwise purchase and put them in a cupboard or simply thrown them away. Because of what the Holy Spirit was doing in my heart, I found them inspiring.

I began asking questions of my two Catholic friends. Magdalen had a lively, active, and joyful faith. I had never heard a Catholic put such emphasis on faith in Christ. Brad had been my Chiropractor for seven years. I knew he was Catholic, but I also knew he was a true believer in Christ. His life had been an example of charity and friendship. I knew he loved the Lord. This made him an oddity to me and I simply refused to think about his religious affiliation because it did not fit into my theological stereotypes.

I asked Magdalen and Brad isolated questions to see what kind of answers I would get. Then one day in Brad's office I began asking deeper questions. He said he was not much of an apologist, but he knew a book I should read. I bristled immediately and told him that I was a "sola scriptura kind of person" and if the Catholic faith was not scripturally sound, I was not going to consider it.

He smiled and assured me that it was indeed scripturally sound and that I just needed to read the book, called "Rome, Sweet Home" which he promised to get for me. I asked for a Catechism as well. I thought that if I was going to examine this faith, I needed an authoritative resource, not merely a testimonial. He agreed. At that point, with the exception of Magdalen and Brad, no one knew I was thinking about the Catholic faith. And I certainly wouldn't have been caught dead buying a copy of the Catechism of the Catholic Church.

Drawn by the Eucharist

In late April, 2000, still curious about how I could have so much in common with Magdalen, I was inspired. I thought if she came to my church, she would find she was even more at home there than she was in her Church. At the same time, I was curious about what went on at a Catholic Mass. So I called Magdalen and suggested we visited each other's church. She agreed, and I made plans to attend my first Catholic Mass the next evening (which turned out to be Divine Mercy Sunday).

I was nervous as I approached the doors of the Church, but once inside it seemed like a normal place. There were none of the medieval pictures or statues I expected. The walls were familiar

beige and the decorating was of a Southwestern flavor. The baptistery was obviously for immersion, which made me feel more at home. I sat down and tried to be calm and relaxed.

As Mass began, I realized what a fish out of water I was. Everyone knew what to do – except me. There was so much bowing and gesturing! I tried to fight the tension building up in my neck and shoulders. After some pleasant singing, we sat down and a woman reverently stepped to the podium and read a passage of Scripture. Hearing Scriptures made me feel more at ease. Just as I began to relax, the congregation stood and began singing. Then the deacon turned and bowed to the priest, who made the sign of the cross over him. He walked to the pulpit and read a passage from the gospels.

So far, I was very impressed with how scriptural everything was. Even the sermon was quite good. I didn't understand the need for the formality and pageantry, but I could see why my friend's faith seemed so biblical. Everything this community did revolved around scripture and prayer.

Then came the Eucharist.

I had no idea how my life was about to change. Without warning, the Presence of God fell on that place. I had never felt Him as powerfully as I did at that moment. I lost touch with most of what was happening around me. I barely kept up with the liturgy. I stood there bathed in the light of His breathtaking Presence. It went on and on as each of the parishioners filed forward to receive communion.

As the Mass ended, I was speechless with joy at the Presence of God. I hugged my friend and said goodbye. I walked into the parking lot not able to feel my feet on the pavement. I prayed frantically for answers. "What was that, Lord? I have to understand this. What do I do now?? I know you want me to look into the Catholic faith, but where do I begin? I am not a theologian or a scholar. Where does an everyday person like me begin?"

His answer came back immediately and unmistakably: "Start with what draws you; start with the Eucharist." I drove home knowing I would do just that, somehow, some way. I was excited ... and afraid.

Catholic myths go up in smoke

While Brad was rounding up books for me, I tried to think of another way of getting information. I didn't know whom to trust. If I went to my extreme-Calvinist associate pastor, I knew what he would say: "Run, repent, refuse to listen to those deceivers!" I knew where my brother stood and I knew I would not get unbiased information from him. So I prayed for wisdom.

Then I remembered a man I'd known years back, a man who'd become close to the Catholic Church, yet still held many of the same beliefs I did. Back then I had been deeply moved by what he had to say though I didn't understand why. I felt I could get some objective information from him, and since he lived so far away, I could avoid discovery by friends and family.

For the next month this man sent me by e-mail Catholic doctrine on the Eucharist, justification, purgatory, and many other topics. He gave me solid, objective information, and endured my endless

and often repeated questions – especially about the sacrificial aspect of the Eucharist. The documents he sent began to show me that the early Church saw the Eucharist as not just a symbol or a memorial, but as the true presence of Christ.

I was shocked by what I was discovering. Contrary to what I had been taught to believe by my Baptist friends and family, Catholics weren't cannibals; they didn't believe that Jesus was crucified over and over again on the altar; the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist was not a medieval innovation, but a thoroughly apostolic and biblical doctrine handed down from the earliest times. It was an integral part of Christian worship from the earliest times!

The Catholic Faith was nothing like I had thought it was.

At that same time, Brad gave me the books he had offered me. I started reading *Rome Sweet Home* by Scott Hahn and his wife Kimberly, both of whom were converts to Catholicism. I had never heard of a Protestant converting to the Catholic Church. I knew many unconverted people who had left the Church to become Protestant, but I had never considered people of great faith, devotion to Christ and academic excellence actually claiming to follow Christ into the Catholic Church. As their story unfolded, I could identify closely with Scott's allegiance to scripture and to Kimberly's struggle with long held prejudices and stereotypes.

I spent the weekend finishing *Rome Sweet Home* and the theological foundations on which I had built my life cracked and could no longer support me. It was frightening and exhilarating at the same time: I was both thrilled by the possibility that Jesus was present in the Mass and terrified that I might have to leave the comfort of my doctrinal heritage and familial beliefs and venture into unknown territory, quite possibly alone.

I make a few friends in heaven

Monday morning I woke up and realized that I had lost a small Celtic cross off of my charm bracelet the day before. I assumed I had lost it while walking the dogs the day before. When I walked them again later that day, I watched the sidewalk carefully. I loved that cross, and wanted it back.

So I decided to test the Catholic waters a bit. I didn't know if there was a patron saint of lost things, or what his name might be, but I sheepishly prayed that if there were such a saint, he would pray for me and I would find that cross. But the cross didn't appear miraculously, and I soon lost hope of finding it.

I was tutoring that summer at a high school in an unfamiliar area. I didn't even know the name of the street it was on; I just watched for the parking lot and turned on the street immediately after it. As I drove to work that Monday, I prayed out loud about the things God was doing in my life. I had just finished telling the Lord that if He was calling me to the Catholic Church, I would choose St. Patrick as my patron saint because Patrick had led me there. Just as I uttered those words, I approached the school parking lot. The light turned red and I had to stop. I looked forward as I waited for the green light. There before me was a street sign. Patrick Street!

Taking off my Protestant glasses

Summer school ended and I had more time for reading. I decided that before I put my marriage, my family, and my whole life on the line, I would need to be sure of what I was doing. Even to have considered the Catholic faith would be an embarrassment among my peers. It would have shown I had doubted our own rightness. I was not willing to damage my reputation.

I wanted to know that what I was studying was accurate. For example, in *Rome Sweet Home* some of the quotations from the early Church were quite a revelation and I wanted to know if they were authentic. I had grown up mistrusting Catholics and anyone of a different belief system, including other Protestants. I needed to check the word of this Catholic convert to see if he was quoting the early Christians honestly.

I went to the Internet and looked up the writings of St. Ignatius of Antioch. I will never forget reading his words concerning the Eucharist: “They abstain from the Eucharist and from prayer because they do not confess that the Eucharist is the flesh of our Savior Jesus Christ, flesh which suffered for our sins and which that Father, in his goodness, raised up again. They who deny the gift of God are perishing in their disputes.” I gasped and pushed my chair back from my computer. “I’ve been robbed!”

After checking some of the other quotes I had read, I realized that my mistrust of Catholicism had been misplaced. I needed to question everything about Catholicism I had believed until then. It was time to take off the Protestant glasses.

I decided to test the direction I was heading by reading my brother’s books against the Catholic Church. I knew of no other books with as strong an anti-Catholic message as his. I reasoned that if he could not refute what I had learned from the Bible and Christian history about the Catholic Church, it could not be refuted. I had recently finished reading his book challenging Catholic teachings on Mary; I took two of his other books off the shelf at home and began studying them as well,

I soon saw that James was fighting a caricature of the Catholic Church: his arguments attacked an ascribed to the Catholic Church, but his anti-Catholic rhetoric left the real teachings of the Church unscathed. His characterization of the Eucharist as a repeated sacrifice of Christ demonstrated his ignorance of Catholic doctrine and an earthbound view of heavenly reality. You cannot repeat a sacrifice that exists perpetually in the eternal present of heaven! [Endnote 3]

He called the sacrifice of the Mass a denigration of the finished work of Christ on the cross, showing his failure to see that the sacrifice of the Mass is Christ’s once for all work applied to our lives within the earthbound limits of time. Although examples of temporal punishment for sin fill Scripture, he denied the existence of Purgatory. His arguments against the Communion of Saints and devotion to Mary demonstrated a superficial understanding of the biblical evidence as well as of the Catholic teaching that in the mystical body of Christ, each of us is called to intercede on behalf of each other.

It was clear that he had never looked at scripture or history from a Catholic perspective. Neither had I until recently. And while that change of perspective made all of scripture and history make perfect sense for me, he continued to wield his pen in defense of his truncated, innovative

protestant perspective. Having grasped the Catholic perspective, his ranting seems senseless and vicious to me. Rather than turn me away from the Catholicism, my brother's books only confirmed and deepened my interest in it.

Searching for peace at the crossroads of a choice

Months earlier, I had attended a seminar on Catholicism presented by one of our associate pastors, who had been raised Catholic and later become a "born again Christian." He had made up a chart to present what he believed the Catholic Church taught and the opposing Protestant position for each doctrinal point. I had kept the chart. Now I took it out to see if there was information there that I was overlooking in my examination of Catholic teaching. But rather than discovering fatal flaws in the Catholic position, I found that even after just a few months of study I could disprove each point this pastor attempted to make against the Catholic Church. I remembered how he and some in the audience had mocked the Catholic Church and I shuddered at their ignorance, and at their irreverence for truths I had begun to see so clearly.

After wading through more materials critical of the Roman Catholic Church, I became utterly convinced that the Catholic Church was right about these biblical and historical issues and the Protestant arguments were wrong. I no longer had a choice. I had to embrace the Catholic faith, or run from the truth and go back to where I had been, and spare myself the struggle that lay ahead.

I was terrified and had trouble sleeping. I sought constantly to discern the truth. I prayed for God's guidance and protection from deception. I would wake up in the night debating with myself. I had troubling dreams about the opposition I would face if I embraced the Catholic faith.

One of my prayers at that time was that God would give me peace and joy: peace of mind, so that I could think clearly without fear and confusion; joy, because the joy of the Lord had been my strength and I needed that strength now.

The Hahns lend a hand

While making dinner one night when, burdened by discouragement, I prayed that God would send help. Suddenly the phone rang. It was Magdalen. She asked if I was all right. I smiled, knowing my prayer had been answered. I asked if I could call her back in a few minutes, made some excuse to my family as I set dinner on the table and I rushed to the bedroom to make the call. Magdalen was on the other line with her sister and asked if she could call me back later. I hung up. But the need to talk to someone was unbearable.

I took a long shot and called the Hahns.

The young lady who answered said Kimberly was busy with the baby and Scott was away. I left my name and number and lay face down on my bed, praying with all my heart that she would call me back. Minutes later the phone rang. It was Kimberly.

I asked if she had ever heard of James White. She had. Then I told her I was his sister. I could hear a soft gasp on the other end of the line. Looking back, I can imagine her thinking that here she was,

alone with the kids, late in the evening, probably tired, and she had James White's sister on the phone. I imagine she shot up a prayer for help.

I took in a big breath and with the tears beginning to flow I said, "I think God may be calling me to the Catholic Church!" Then I heard a louder gasp, followed by words of love and reassurance. For thirty minutes we talked about everything from sacraments to what Richard's reaction to my conversion might be.

At the end of our conversation she asked if she could pray with me. Although I was afraid of praying with a Catholic because I figured I would not know how, I said I would be happy to pray with her. She began in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit and my heart warmed at the sound of the invocation of the Holy Trinity. She prayed for me in love and concern that I would follow Jesus wherever He led me. She didn't pray that I would become a Catholic but that God would give me peace and joy in my journey and make plain to me where He was leading.

Peace and joy.

I smiled through the tears. My constant prayer those past weeks was her prayer for me.

At the end of our conversation, I asked if I could correspond with her and Scott to ask questions. She gave me the e-mail address of their secretary, Marie. She was a convert herself and a knowledgeable catechist. We began to correspond almost daily, and are still very close friends. Marie not only answered all my questions, she stood beside me through the tough times and prayed me through some of the hardest days of my life. She has proven to be a treasure as a friend.

Marie endured my endless and often redundant questions. At one particularly frustrating moment, she said, "Patty, you can enjoy the ballet, or you can study muscles!" She explained to me that the faith is more than just isolated doctrines; it has an organic unity that makes it one perfect whole. I wasn't able to see that yet and still needed to scrutinize every teaching.

I break the news to Richard

The time had come to tell my husband what was going on in my heart. Our marriage had been so painful; now I was going to make it more challenging. He had married a Baptist girl and intended to raise our girls as Baptists; now I was thinking of becoming a Catholic. Earlier in our marriage we had both seen Catholicism as a false religion and would have been terribly disturbed if any of our girls had even dated a Catholic. Now I was standing on the banks of the Tiber, wondering if I was going to have to cross alone. Completely alone.

One afternoon I asked Richard to come into our room for a talk. I was terrified that the next few moments would see the end of our family. I forced out the words to explain that I had been studying the Catholic faith for several months and that I was discovering it was nothing I was raised to believe it was. I had discovered that the Catholic Church is far more like the early Church than ours was. I had read most of my brother's arguments against the Church and had not found them persuasive. I wanted to take classes at a local parish and learn more. What did he think?

I sat and trembled and waited for an explosion. I barely breathed as he stood and walked toward the door. Then he calmly said, “Do what you feel you need to do.”

I could hardly believe my ears. I pressed on.

“What if the things I learn make it necessary for me to convert to the Catholic faith?”

He said again that I should do what I felt I had to do.

Like Abraham fearing he might aggravate God by pushing for an even better answer, I tried one more question. “What if the elders of our present church came after him to try to make him stop me?”

Richard turned and looked at me: “I would tell them to mind their own business.”

With that he left the room. I could barely believe it! The explosion had not come. I was free to search for truth and follow Christ wherever He led me.

In August we went on a family vacation. I had a lot of time the van to read and listen to tapes. I had taken along Scott Hahn’s three-tape series on the Eucharist. I could hardly contain myself as I listened. I wanted so much to share what I was learning with my family!

I had also been reading Hahn’s *The Father Who Keeps His Promises*. I spent a glorious afternoon finishing the book and seeing how from Adam and Eve to the present day God had reached out to humanity through His covenants. Salvation history stretched out before me like a huge schematic of God’s love for mankind. I closed the book, walked out onto the balcony of our hotel room, looked up and before the Lord and all the hosts of Heaven, declared, “I’m Catholic, I’m coming home!”

All the way home, I was both happy and afraid. The more I contemplated the ramifications of my decision the more fearful I grew. Could I bear losing my friends? Oh, dear Lord, what if Richard’s reaction was hostile? Would he try to take our children in order to protect them from “the Whore of Babylon?” The joy of discovering Christ’s Church was tempered by my realization of the suffering this discovery might be leading me toward.

God gives me signs of His preparation

Part of that joy the Lord gave me included an awareness of how God had been preparing me in advance to embrace Catholic teaching. As He had helped me see past sola fide, God had led me to understand Purgatory for the most part before I ever realized God’s call to the Catholic faith.

One evening, two years or so before that fateful St. Patrick’s Day, I was deep in prayer, meditating on heaven. Heaven was my favorite subject and I longed to be home with my Heavenly Father. I was asking the Lord what it would be like to come home to Him: what would it be like to pass from this earthly life to life in Heaven? As I prayed I saw God as the consuming fire that Scripture describes Him as. I imagined the light of His presence and the power of His Holiness. I saw myself, an imperfect human, leaving this world and moving heavenward. As heaven approached, the radiance of His Presence had the same effect that a fire has on an object that gets close. Eventually

anything flammable ignited and burned away. All that was left was imperishable and pure. I could see myself passing from my imperfect state in this life to the brilliance of His presence with the smoke of all my imperfection trailing behind me as I flew to the arms of my Heavenly Father. I had seen the fires of Purgatory and they held no fear for me. Whatever had to happen so that I could look Him in the eyes and be His forever was worth the pain. Refiner's fire, come and consume this living sacrifice!

When I read Scott Hahn's description of Purgatory in *Rome Sweet Home*, I recognized the vision I had years before. God had been calling all along. He had been making the way straight so that when He knew He could trust me with His call, I would be able to look back and recognize his working in my heart over time.

For a long time I had been looking for that Celtic cross on the sidewalks of my neighborhood. I grew weary of looking and decided to "compromise" with God. As I walked the dogs one night, I told the Lord that obviously someone had found my cross and picked it up or it had been pressed into the hot asphalt long ago. I asked the Lord, since the little cross had only cost me \$4 and I knew I could get another one, would he please have someone give me \$4 in cash so I could replace it? I would pay the 28 cents tax, but I needed the \$4 from Him.

That evening I visited my mother and father. Just before I left, my mother walked up to me with four one-dollar bills and said it was "to help with gas or whatnot." I sat there unable to speak. She had fanned out the bills so that there were obviously four of them. It was as though the Lord wanted to be very clear that someone was giving me \$4 just as I had asked. That night I went to bed smiling about God's answer to my prayer.

When I got ready to go the next day, I turned my wallet upside down and poured my change out. There was exactly 28 cents. I thanked whoever it was in Heaven who had prayed for me and I prayed that at the craft store there would be another cross like the one I'd lost. There was. I bought it and took it home, figuring it was as close to a direct answer from the patron saint of lost things as I would get.

That same night, as we were going to bed, my husband paused by the linen closet and asked "Whose Irish cross is laying on the shelf?" There it was – the original cross I thought I had dropped in the street! I clutched the cross to my heart and gave in to knowing I was not alone: I had friends in high places who prayed, and prayed well. Thank you, St. Anthony (whom I now know to be patron of lost items). It's beautiful. They both are!

With RCIA classes starting I decided to attend the parish of my friend Brad. The first Sunday night I attended Mass there I knew I had found my home. I had an unmistakable sense of being right where God wanted me. My oldest daughter Kimberly began classes with me, but eventually quit because of school conflicts and because of the Communion of Saints: she just could not accept praying to "dead" people. She argued with her teacher in the high school RCIA class. In her frustration she even wrote a letter to Scott Hahn asking questions about liturgy and saints. (Her letter would become a blessing to me later.) I kept my promise not to make her become Catholic. I let her walk away and committed her to Jesus and His pursuing love. He had found me and brought me home, He could deal with her.

On the trail of apostolic tradition

Even as I continued to embrace Church teachings, through my readings I also grew more comfortable with the Church's conception of her own authority. Over the years, I had heard all sorts of mind-twisting excuses to explain away the authority of the visible, historic Church. I'd heard that there had been a secret congregation of Baptists hiding in the caves and surviving without a trace over hundreds of years until they could come out in the open after the Reformation. I had heard that the Catholic Church started out all right, but suffered corruption when Constantine became emperor and made Christianity legal. I had bought into the absurd theory that the pagan priests were without jobs, so they signed on as Catholic priests and introduced pagan idolatry into the Christian faith. Now all these excuses seemed unthinkable in the light of the obvious Catholicity of the earliest writings of the Fathers.

One quick tour through Eusebius' History of the Church makes it clear that the Church has believed in the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist, in baptismal regeneration, in Purgatory, in Mary's role as the perpetually Virgin Mother of God and New Eve, and all other Catholic teachings since before Constantine was born; in fact, since the apostles walked the earth. I tracked down every Catholic teaching that scandalized my Protestant mind and over and over again I found them clearly present in the pre-Constantine Church writings. The Catechism that Brad had bought me and that had offended me when I first started reading it, now read for me like a modern language version of early Church writings.

I had once attended an organizational meeting that my brother held when he was assembling his work on the "King James Only" controversy. I remember him emphasizing how carefully the scriptures had been preserved. What he overlooked was that those who had been so meticulous in preserving the scriptures – the Catholics – had been equally meticulous in preserving oral traditions. They were one and the same truth. To read about Polycarp repeating from memory the things Christ had done and the teachings of the Apostles was a perfect example of how meticulously the early Christians guarded Sacred Tradition. Eusebius quotes St. Irenaeus of Lyons discussing his memories of learning at the feet of St. Polycarp: "To these things I listened eagerly at the time by the mercy of God shown to me, not committing them to writing but learning them by heart. By God's grace, I constantly and conscientiously ruminate on them" [Endnote 4].

From dwelling in their writings, I was beginning to understand the vantage point of the early Christians. It was becoming obvious that the Lord had left us a living and authoritative Tradition that eventually found expression in written form, but that it was the Tradition, written or oral, that was the Christian faith. There was no real expectation in the early Church that we would ever govern our lives and worship strictly by the writings of the Apostles and their contemporaries. The early Christians had received the faith in total as the apostolic tradition and were guarding it for all time. St. Irenaeus had no compulsion to write down what he had heard from St. Polycarp; he hid the word of God in his heart [Endnote 5].

At this point I finally developed complete confidence in the teaching authority of the Church. I trusted those precious saints of God down through the ages who had guarded the truth and plumbed its depths to explain the mysteries of God for future generations. Oh glorious reality, that there is in this world an ultimate authority to which Jesus not only delivered the truth, but which has guarded that truth according to His promise!

Esther opens up

In late September 2000, I reached the point where I couldn't hide any longer. There was no turning back. I sat in the dim light of my desk lamp late one night to compose an email to my friends at Northwest Community Church that changed my life forever. Since all my family members attended other churches, I still had some time before my family discovered my plans, but it was only a matter of time before word would reach them. I wanted to tell them before they found out from someone else. Richard was on my side and the home front was stable, so I felt it was time to speak.

On Oct 10th my daughter Esther and I went down the street to get an ice cream and have some girl talk. As we sat down on the bench outside the ice cream store I asked her what she wanted to talk about. Expecting we would be chatting about her friends and school, I was surprised to hear her say, "I want to talk about the Mass." Only a month before, she had come to me crying, saying that she was trying to learn to be a Christian and now I wanted her to learn to be a Catholic. Then, she was angry and confused and my heart broke; now she was sitting with me eating her ice cream and calmly asking about the Mass.

I walked through the Mass for her and in terms that a twelve-year-old with a Baptist background would understand and explained what Catholics believe about the Eucharist. Her eyes lit up and she took in everything I said. When I finished she told me she wanted to go with me next time I went to Mass.

I die to my mother

Later that day we went to my parents' house with a gift for my mother's birthday. As we drove there I hid my crucifix under my shirt. I had been doing this for some time now, and so far it had kept my secret secure. I promised the Lord that this was the last time I would hide Him. I would write that letter to James and to my parents this week and I would not ever again deny my faith before them. It was a terrifying thought, but I could not live in secret any longer.

We visited with my mother and father and an ex-Catholic friend of theirs. My mother had received a necklace for her birthday and was showing it to me. I guess the subject of necklaces made her notice the chain that ran around my neck and under my shirt. Before I knew what was happening her hand was on my chain; she asked what I was wearing and started to pull my crucifix from its hiding place. I knew that if she uncovered a crucifix (a good Protestant would never wear one) in front of her ex-Catholic, presently Baptist friend, it would be humiliating for her, so I placed my hand over my necklace and asked if we could step outside to talk. Esther shot out of her chair and headed for the door. Dread of the coming emotional explosion gripped us both.

When we were outside, my mother took hold of the crucifix and the St. Barbara medal that hung behind it. With a gasp she cried, "Catholic, why Catholic?" She dropped my necklace and grabbed her own hair as though she would pull it out. I attempted to assure her of my love for her and for the Lord, but she wouldn't hear me. She wailed like a mourner at the bedside of a dead relative. She put her hands over her face and ran into the house.

Esther and I looked at each other, took each other's hand, and headed for the car. On the way home, Esther told me that now she knew I was right about the Catholic faith, because she had seen me stand up for what I believed. My little one was coming home.

My parents informed James of my decision to convert to the Catholic Church. About a week later I received from him the first in a string of scathing letters containing theological rebuttals and personal attacks. He accused me of becoming Catholic to hurt my parents or to get attention. He said I had always been "unstable" and that this was just more proof of that. Basically, in his refusal to believe my account of my father's abuse he combined his resentment toward me with his hatred for the Church and let his anger rage through his words. More letters followed of the same flavor.

Since my conversion I've done my best to respond to some of his accusations and arguments, but their sheer numbers and his antagonistic tone have wearied me to the point that I now simply ignore them. I'm convinced that only God's saving grace and merciful love can quench the anger that fuels some Protestants' hatred of the Church. In my brother's case, it would take him realizing that he stands where he does because his identity is that of a champion of the Reformation. If he were to convert, who would he be? He would also lose the respect of his father who he holds in high esteem. So he has many reasons not to see things from an objective point of view. But I refuse to give up praying for him and my parents and hoping that someday they will lay down their swords and realize that it is Jesus Himself they are persecuting.

As I wait for that blessed day, I'm content in the knowledge that in becoming Catholic, I chose the truth over error. When I abandoned the heresies of the Reformation, I embraced Christian orthodoxy. I did the right thing. It may be God's will that I suffer for a time for the sake of the Truth, but if that is His will for my life I accept it. I will continue prayerfully to offer up my suffering for the sake of my brother's conversion to the truth; historicity over innovation.

Confirmation from my old pastor!

Reactions to my letter began to come in. For the most part people just faded out of my life. Two ex-Catholic friends had some cold words (one of them was good enough to apologize months later).

Then the associate pastor of my former church called and asked to meet with me. We made an appointment for Oct. 31. I was nervous because although I had answered my own questions about the Catholic faith, I was very new at defending what I had come to believe.

In his office I tried to explain what had happened to me over the past several months. He made two comments that encouraged me. I am sure he didn't mean for them to, but they were some of the strongest reasons to become and stay Catholic that I have ever heard. At one moment of frustration with me he said, "Patty, you can read Scripture from the vantage point of the Reformation, or you can read scripture from the vantage point of Tradition."

I just smiled. He was right. I could interpret Scripture through one of the 32,000 perspectives the Reformation had created, or I could interpret Scripture in the one light of the Church's 2000 year old Tradition.

Later he mentioned that he had received an e-mail that contained proof that the Catholic Church had not changed its position on soteriology – the theology of salvation – in 2,000 years. This time, my grin was obvious. What a glorious thought! I was embracing truth that had never changed from the beginning! My smile must have let him know he wasn't affecting me in the least, so he brought our meeting to an end and I left, rejoicing.

Nothing warm and fuzzy about it

I've received many different reactions from Protestants to my conversion. One that makes me chuckle inwardly is the claim that I am simply a victim of "emotionalism"; that I became Catholic because it made me feel warm and fuzzy or some silly notion like that. Had I intellectually understood the biblical issues, the claim goes, I never would have been so foolish as to embrace the unbiblical "Gospel of Rome."

The misguided people who have told me this have no idea how I agonized over my decision to become Catholic. Fear and loneliness were the predominant emotions that characterized my months of biblical study, scrutiny of Church history, and prayerful discernment. These are hardly emotions that would entice someone to choose the Catholic Church. In fact, I struggled against my emotions — which were telling me to not become Catholic because of the upheaval and pain it would cause in my life if I did — so that I could objectively weigh the evidence for Catholicism.

Beholding my mother

One day my mother called my husband to beg him not to let our children enter the Church. He told me about it that evening, and I remember feeling so betrayed. I remember standing in the kitchen that evening doing my chores and crying out to God in the silence of my soul. "Why can't she understand? Why can't she trust me to follow you? I dread her wrath, Lord. I need a mother . . . His answer to my prayer interrupted my thoughts. "You have one." I knew He was referring to the Blessed Virgin Mary, whose role in the Faith I was just beginning to consider. I knew that it was time to come to terms with my Mother Mary.

In November my husband surprised me with the dream of my life – a trip to Ireland. I had longed to go to Ireland since I was young. I could hardly believe we were actually going to set foot in the places where my older brother Patrick had proclaimed the gospel and faced off with the druids 1600 years ago.

I asked Marie for information on Mary to fill the time on the plane and hopefully to bring me peace about this subject. My brother's book on Mary made it sound like the Catholic Church made Mary the fourth member of the Godhead. He insisted, as many Protestants do, that Mary's mediation usurped the one mediation of Christ. I had developed confidence in the teaching authority of the Church, but I still was uncomfortable with the concept of Mary as a mediator. I had been raised in a "Jesus and Me" environment. Any involvement in my relationship with God by anyone other than Jesus seemed like an encroachment on His unique place. Yet I never hesitated to ask others to help me interpret Scripture, to intercede for me in prayer, or to help me bear my burdens. I had relied heavily on my brother and my pastor for interpretation of Scripture. I had trusted only those sources they endorsed. I read the Bible translation they suggested. Yet the concept of Jesus' mother praying for me or carrying my prayers to the Lord was disconcerting.

I prayed the entire Rosary for the first time on the plane en route to Ireland. I felt awkward and was not certain that 30,000 feet in the air was the best place to risk offending God by praying to His mother. It probably wasn't the best time to scandalize Richard, either, so I hid my beads under a blanket while I prayed.

During our trip to Ireland we visited the site where St. Patrick is buried. After we took pictures and the rest of the family headed back to the car, I knelt down and whispered to St. Patrick, "Thank you so much for all you've done for me." It was a very special moment. We visited many Churches, most of which were Catholic. I remember walking into St. Patrick's Cathedral in Armagh and hearing the bell ring for Mass. It was so painful to turn around and walk out and not at least stay and listen to Mass. I sent up a prayer that someday I would be able to come back to that Church and participate in Mass as a Catholic.

The holidays came and went and on January 1 I was working on our home business and listening to a tape by Scott Hahn on Mary. I had just finished some work and finished one of the tapes and got up to stretch and take a break. The family was around the corner in the living room watching television. I was walking across the school room floor when suddenly I felt as though time stood still and eternity came and parted the curtain between here and there and I saw myself laying across Mary's lap crying out the emotional struggles of my whole journey. In what must have been a split second, I told her about every heart ache and fear involved in the past year's search for truth. I knew she understood completely and that she cared deeply about what I had been through. And then just as quickly as this grace filled moment had come, it was gone. I said to myself under my breath, "what was that!" I realized that my face was drenched with tears and I wiped them away with my sleeve before anyone could notice and ask me what was wrong because I had no idea how I would explain. I didn't quite understand what had happened, but I knew that I no longer had a problem with Mary. She was my mama.

In early 2001 My friend Marie wrote in response to my new love for Mary: "I was thinking of how the Mary as Mediatrix doctrine is something that even faithful, thinking, practicing, cradle Catholics often have a hard time wrapping their understanding around. God just really seems to be going straight to the core and turning your whole life around from the inside out. It's just so much like God to go lovin' after a Calvinist Baptist with Our Blessed Mother. And I mean in a way that He reveals her in such an evident, obvious way. Sometimes Our Lady's role is more like Saran Wrap – we see straight through her to see Jesus more clearly, so much so that we hardly notice she's there. But it is a different grace altogether when the Lord says 'Behold, your mother.' Whoa! That's heavy duty incarnational reality. God has some restitution going on in your life. To the one from whom much was despoiled and plundered, the gaze of God goes most directly, and the holiest help He gives."

Warm welcomes and cold criticisms

January and February were filled with study and a deepening of my faith. My daughter Esther was also growing to love the faith and was becoming devout. On days off we would get up early in the morning to go to Adoration. Her awareness of Jesus' Presence in the Eucharist amazed me. Her spontaneous response to His nearness proved to me that she was not coming home just to be with her mom; she was coming home to be with her Lord.

Early in February I joined the internet discussion group of the Coming Home Network. As a new member, I was asked for my testimony. I had only seen about thirty people taking part in the discussion so far, so figuring it was not a very public forum I felt safe in divulging my story without word getting around. That wouldn't be the only time I underestimated the Internet grapevine. My story was cut and pasted and sent to several Catholic apologists. I began getting e-mail from people who had debated my brother in the past. I was amazed at their tender attitudes toward a man who had been such an ardent opponent. Many of them told me that they prayed for him regularly and had for years.

What a difference from the spirit of war waged in the name of the Reformation! In fact, in my Protestant days I never saw that kind of patience, respect, and unconditional love for those of another faith. We Baptists had always had a kind of patronizing pity for those of other faiths, but never such self-giving love.

Two letters that arrived the same day underscored this difference. My daughter Kimberly got a letter from Scott Hahn addressing her questions in a warm and loving manner and advising her to take her time and just follow Jesus with all her heart wherever He led her. That same day, a letter came to me from my brother, harsh and critical of my conversion. He suggested that a person would have to be mentally unsound to become a Catholic. I kept the letter that was full of the grace and love of God. What a picture God had painted for me of the reality of 1 Cor. 13. Without love, we are empty noise.

About a month before Easter Vigil I received a package from two of my former best friends, containing a letter and a Bible study. The letter itemized the reasons they felt I was in sin and rebellion from God because I was becoming Catholic. They accused me of becoming Catholic in order to establish an ungodly identity separate from my identity in Christ. They had made no effort in the previous months to discern what my spiritual life was becoming. They had no idea that my journey home had resolved some difficult issues that I had struggled with previously. They never took the time to truly know me as a Catholic Christian. They just stated that unless I "repented" of my current decision to become Catholic, *I* would be severing our relationships.

I had, indeed, lost my identity: most of my relatives and friends saw me as a rebel and a fool. But what I was going to gain eventually was my true identity – that of a precious daughter of God, in the bosom of His Church, fed with His own Body and Blood. Conversion is a death-to-self experience. But no one has left home or family or friends to answer God's call who has not been repaid a hundred fold.

So full of grace

My first confession was a wonderful experience. For years I had been confessing my sins before another person, so I was spared the usual terror many people have. I think the most profound moment for me was when I confessed my part in propagating the Protestant Reformation. At first my priest didn't want to hear that as sin, but I made it clear that it meant a lot to me to confess it. I was so relieved to be able to receive absolution for my sins including my rebellion and hatred against the Catholic Church.

On March 26th, 2001, the Feast of the Annunciation, I knelt before the portrait of Our Lady of Guadalupe in our Adoration Chapel with my friends Mimi and John, who had come to witness my Marian consecration. I used the prayer of Consecration suggested by St. Louis de Montfort. When I came to the line, “This day, with the whole court of heaven as witness, I choose you, Mary, as my Mother and Queen,” I began to weep from the depths of my soul. I was coming home *with* my Mom. What joy!

The time came for Esther’s First Confession. She was nervous. We decided to spend time in Adoration before going to Reconciliation. Her discernment of Jesus’ Presence in the Blessed Sacrament had always amazed me, but this evening it was obvious in a new way. When we arrived at the Chapel her little heart was angry about having to suffer “humiliation” before a priest. She could not sit before the Blessed Sacrament in that angry state. She took her paper and pencil and stood around the corner, out of sight of the Monstrance, until her list was finished and she had surrendered to going through with the Sacrament. Only then was she able to sit with me and adore Him.

When she came out of the confessional, she flew into my arms with happy tears streaming down her face. She looked up at me and exclaimed, “I feel so graceful . . . I mean so full of grace!” She wanted to know when we could go to confession again!

Agony of anticipation, sweetness of fulfillment

For 233 days, I had been counting down to the Easter Vigil. As the number shrank to two digits and then to just a handful of days, the agony of not being able to receive communion was as intense as it had been months before – painful in an almost physical way.

Holy Thursday came and Esther and I were awestruck at the solemnity of the Mass. At the end, our parish priest took the Eucharist in the ciborium in his arms, wrapped it carefully in his vestments and carried it from the sanctuary. A sense of emptiness swept over me. My daughter looked up at me and whispered, “Mom, now it feels like a Protestant church in here.” Indeed, it did feel like the churches I had been accustomed to attending before God called us home. I ached for the Presence of Christ to return to the Tabernacle.

Good Friday finally came and the crucifix was laid on the floor at the foot of the altar. We each took our turn venerating the crucifix, patiently waiting for each person in attendance to have a moment to thank Jesus. I knelt and kissed the feet of Jesus on the crucifix. I was not adoring wood and paint. When my lips touched the surface of the crucifix my heart and soul were adoring Jesus Christ my Savior and Lord, crucified, risen, and interceding for me. I had learned the value of sacramentals and of images that help us visualize and sense the presence of those in Heaven. I had gone from being put off by people who touched statues while praying or who kissed images, to one who could hardly pass a statue of Our Blessed Mother without touching Mary’s hand and closing my eyes in order to spend a moment expressing my love for her and asking her intercession for me and for my family.

At long last Holy Saturday arrived. It was a beautiful, sunny day here in Phoenix, and I could barely contain the joy of knowing that there were only hours between us and home. With the exception of a minor wardrobe problem at the last minute, the hours passed by without a hitch. My

family arrived and seated themselves in the church while Esther and I stood outside with the newly lit fire. The celebrant lit the candle and we followed him into the darkened Church, bringing the light of Christ.

Vigil Mass was so beautiful. Esther and I both heard our saints invoked in the Litany of the Saints. I thanked St. Patrick for his intercession, and his testimony that opened my eyes and eventually brought me home. After the catechumens were baptized, it was time for our profession of faith. Esther and I and several others stood to declare to all those there that we believed that the Catholic Church was the true Church which Christ established to be the preserver of truth.

Moments later, we each filed to the front to pronounce our patron saint's name and be confirmed in that name. What a joy it was to hear the priest confirm me as a Catholic in the name Patrick. I bear it proudly and with gratitude. We stood again and approached the altar.

Finally, after months of intense hunger, Esther and I received the Lord Jesus Christ on our tongues and into our beings, the way He had meant for us to receive him.

Oh, for a thousand tongues to sing my great Redeemer's praise!

God spills grace all over my house

During a conversation with Kimberly Hahn a couple of months earlier, she mentioned that when Esther and I began receiving the sacraments; the grace we would be receiving would spill out onto the other members of our family. She was right. It wasn't long before my daughter Kimberly overcame her anti-Catholic prejudice and began asking good questions and accepting the things she was learning. My husband started to ask an occasional question and eventually started studying for himself. God had made it very clear from the beginning of my journey that I needed to stay quiet and let God handle my husband's conversion, if there was to be one. I knew I was not to preach or try to persuade him. I was to love him and live a Catholic life before him. Now it seemed possible I might win him without a word.

By October of 2001 my husband had begun to study in earnest. He sometimes spent entire days closed in the bedroom with a book. He began meeting one on one with my book buddy and RCIA teammate, Bob. Richard is an introvert and for many months the only indication I had that anything positive was happening was that he continued to study and meet with Bob. He and our daughters began going to Mass with us. He would not kneel or genuflect or cross himself; he sat in silence and observed. I was just thankful they were there. We were a family in the pew and it meant the world to me.

After Richard had spent months in silent study, I found an opportunity to ask him what his reaction was to what he had read. He told me that he had come to the point of accepting the Church's teaching on the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist! I was thrilled. I felt prompted to tell him that St. Augustine taught that not only was it not sin to worship the host, it was sin not to. I could see that made an impact on Richard.

The very next Sunday, as we filed into the pew, I glanced behind me just in time to see him genuflect and cross himself. I managed to not burst into tears, but I was the happiest woman in the

world. Before I knew it I was at a Confirmation retreat watching my husband bear witness about how thankful he was that I had boldly lived the faith in our home and introduced the Bonds family to the Roman Catholic Church.

The other night Richard had to write about his journey as an assignment for RCIA class. After quite a while alone in the bedroom he came out and asked if I thought what he had written made sense. I cried like a baby when I read his words. He had been so quiet, rarely giving me a glimpse into his heart, but with these few words the reality of his conversion became crystal clear to me. He wrote:

“Although I have spent over 40 years in a Protestant Church, and felt God’s presence in my life, I always felt that something was lacking. I don’t believe that these 40+ years were wasted in my growing relationship with God; on the contrary, they served as stepping stones to lead me closer to the Father Almighty and to His Son, Jesus.

“My wife, Patty, having been obedient to God’s leading, caused a light to go on in my head that created a desire to investigate the Catholic Church. Having read several books, listened to several tapes, conversed with my wife, and after attending several Masses, I could discern quite quickly that my journey was finally leading me to cross the Tiber River. I was coming home to Rome!

“For a cradle Catholic, this probably seems uneventful. For me however, it feels like scales have been lifted from my eyes, and now I can finally see the richness of the intimacy of Christ during the celebration of the Eucharist in the Mass.

“I do not take this journey lightly, nor do I take it for granted. I would not have crossed over the Tiber River without God giving me the faith to reach out to Jesus so that He could gently lead me across!

“My new journey is now just beginning. Already it is full of mystery, anticipation, and wonder. If I was able to be obedient to God’s leading me to the Tiber, then with the grace of God, He will provide me with the faith necessary to continue my journey after having crossed the Tiber into Rome!

“Thanks be to God!”

May you have light to see and courage to act.

As I look back on my life, I can see the hand of God leading and healing and bringing me ever closer to the fullness of His truth. I thank God for the rich heritage of scripture and moral teaching that my former faith tradition gave me. I am especially thankful for the lessons in discipleship I learned from those at my former church who not only helped me heal from my past, but also taught me how to follow Christ even when it meant going it alone.

The ultimate test of how well I learned the lessons they taught me came when I had to follow Christ as He led me in a direction they considered unthinkable. I don’t blame my parents for the anti-Catholic things they taught me. They were taught the same things by their parents, who were taught the same things by their parents – all the way back to the Reformation.

Even as I write these words, furious opposition from my brother continues. One of his main accusations has been that before becoming Catholic I didn't listen to tapes of his debates; therefore, I wasn't really informed about the problems with Catholicism. My response is that I was well aware of his positions and arguments against Rome, partly because I had studied his written material, but mainly because I grew up in that same milieu. I was raised from childhood to believe in the same doctrines and attitudes toward Rome that he was.

Nonetheless, I decided that I should take up his challenge of listening to his debates against Catholics. I have to admit now that I regret not listening to them sooner. Had I heard these debates sooner, there is no doubt I would have converted to the Catholic Church years earlier. I had never heard the Catholic position explained well and without the bias of anti-Catholics like my brother.

I challenge you who are outside the Catholic Church to take off your Protestant glasses and read the writings of the early Church Fathers and the scriptures in the light of the time and the culture in which they were written. Lay aside your prejudices and fears. Be open to the glorious possibility that God did indeed establish a visible Church and entrust to her the truth of the Faith. Be open to the fact that 2000 years later He continues to keep his promise to lead the Church into all truth.

It was frightening for me to take off those glasses, to consider that perhaps what I had believed all my life had been based on errors passed down for generations. Conversion is death to self. I was keenly aware that I was ending the life I had known to follow Christ.

But how could I walk away from the truth about Catholicism that I had seen so clearly in scripture and in history? How could I walk away from the Jesus I loved? How could I not run to receive him now that I knew he was truly Present in the Eucharist?

I could not be like those in John chapter 6 who walk away from the One who has the words of eternal life. I had come to the point where nothing else in life mattered as much as being nestled in the bosom of the Church that Christ established, nourished by his precious Body and Blood.

Oh taste and see that the Lord is good; happy are those who take refuge in him [Endnote 6].

Endnotes

1 The "Reformed churches" are those Protestant churches, such as Presbyterianism, that follow the theology of the Reformers Ulrich Zwingli (1484-1381) and, more particularly, John Calvin (1509-1564).

2 Cf. Matt. 7:21-23, 18:21-35; Luke 6:46-49; 1 Cor. 13; James 2: 1 John 3:19-24.

3 Cf. Hebrews 10:10.

4 Eusebius, History of the Church 5, 20, 5-7, p.169.

5 Cf. Psalms 119:11.

6 Cf. Psalms 34:8.

Post Script:

After 21 years of trying to make our marriage something it never was, our marriage ended in divorce. The issues that made it impossible for us to survive as a couple ran deep within each of us.

I am happy to say that not only have we both remained fervent Catholics, all of our children have also become Catholics. Our middle daughter, Sarah, had refused to give God any place in her life up until a couple of years after our divorce. She met a wonderful young man who had never stepped inside a church of any type in his life. He joined the girls and I for Mass at St. Thomas the Apostle in Phoenix one Sunday evening. Not long after, I received a text message from Sarah saying that she and Justin wanted information about RCIA. One year later they were received into the Catholic Church through baptism and all the Sacraments of initiation. Almost two years later, this past January 3, 2009, they were married at the same altar where their new lives began previously.

While life will always be a struggle, and while sins of the past still create hardships in the present, God's grace is still pouring over our family in amazing ways. I've been Catholic for almost 8 years now and I've never looked back. Who could turn their head when the God of the Universe is right before us in the Tabernacle. I will give Him praise for His amazing grace to us as long as He gives me breath.

Please stop by my blog at abbaslittlegirl.blogspot.com for more information of healing from sexual abuse, divorce recovery and annulment. God is all about redemption. He has not given up on you. Come see what I mean.