

David M. Lalejini's Conversion Story

Let me preface this with, I am thankful for all the wonderful Christian people God has put in my life. I am thankful for the path God has led me on, and how he used some very beautiful Protestant and Catholic Christians, through their prayers and examples, to draw me to Him. I am very thankful to my parents, who are faithful Christians and have always been great examples to me of God's love. They still attend the same small Baptist church that I grew up in, and the people there are very kind and love the Lord.

My mom and I were Catholic when I was a young child, until we started going to a Southern Baptist church (I was around 10 or 11 years old). It was there at age 11 that I had a very sincere salvation experience. At 11 years old, I was that kid who went to all the retreats with the youth group, prayed and read my Bible daily, shared Christ with my friends, passed out tracts door to door inviting people to church, always did his Sunday School lessons, went to the revivals, did through the mail Bible study courses, attended the Wednesday night prayer meetings, etc., all out of love for Jesus and in sincere appreciation for what He'd done for me. I couldn't get enough of God in my life, and wanted to share Him with those around me. It was wonderful.

However, as a teenager, I fell to temptation. I struggled with all the things that the world dangles in front of young people, and decided to buy Satan's lies over God's Truth. After a while, I realized how dirty with sin I had become, and realized that something was deeply wrong in my soul. To put it bluntly, my soul was dead. I became firmly convicted that I wasn't 'saved' anymore and my soul was bound for hell. So what did I do? I walked the aisle in my church again and accepted Christ as my Lord and Savior again, and was baptized again. Why? Because I had to assume that the first time I was saved at age 11 wasn't real, because we all knew that 'once saved always saved' was the gospel truth. This set up a deep-seated controversy down in my soul, a contradiction that my theology could not account for. This contradiction would lead to even deeper spiritual struggles, until finally one day I would give up trying.

In both salvation experiences, I felt God's hand on me and sincerely gave my heart to Him completely. I was, from the bottom of my heart, in love with Jesus Christ, and His presence spiritually was very real to me in my life

each time I was 'saved.' After I walked the aisle the second time, something didn't seem right. I had been sincere with God the first time. Did that mean that the experience I had with God at age 11 had not been real? How could I ever know if my salvation was assured if I had already been duped by Satan the first time I thought I'd gotten 'saved?' Something was nagging at me, telling me that the first experience was very real and that when I fell away, I had lost my salvation. My reaction in my late teens and twenties was to just reject God completely. I couldn't handle the 'spiritual rollercoaster' ride of was I saved or not.

Further into my 20's, falling ever faster from Him, then into my early 30's, I resented Christianity in general, but especially Catholicism. Strange how even after I had rejected Christ in my life, my disdain and repulsion of Catholicism in particular got worse. Almost seems like Satan was trying to build his wall as high as he could around me. Satan's tactics are to build lie upon lie, but to make them all appear as truth. The bricks in his wall around me were one lie upon another. I had picked up a lot of prejudicial baggage against Catholicism from God-fearing, well-meaning Protestants.

Yes, I had also read some of the Chick tracts. I believed that if there was a whore of Babylon, it was the idol-worshipping Catholic Church. Attitudes such as those found in Chick tracts had given me a twisted image of the Church as a young Protestant teen, and these twisted beliefs only got worse when I turned my back on God. Even though Mr. Chick may mean well, his materials plant seeds of bitterness and hatred. These are not fruits of the Spirit, but of the evil one. They prey especially upon Catholics who are not deeply rooted in their faith and do not understand the Biblical support for Catholic teaching. The 'whore of Babylon' attitude eventually gave way to simply looking at the Catholic Church as the tattered remains of a fallen empire, trying to hold on to power any way it could.

If someone would talk to me about history and the Roman Empire, I'd say it is still around; we just call it the Catholic Church. All I can say is that the devil used my spiritually dead state to keep me where he wanted me, very unhappy, never satisfied inside. I contemplated reincarnation, was fascinated by other religions, and didn't see why Christianity thought it was right despite so many other religions in the world. I had gotten married in my early 20's. My wife, of all things, was Catholic (God does have a sense of humor)! We had a service in a Catholic Chapel at my university, and my Baptist minister even attended. It wasn't that important what religion she

was, since I had already given up on that kind of thing in my own life. And anyway, she wasn't too serious about being Catholic, so it was okay. We even quit going to Mass after we were married.

In my late 20's, we had our first son. My wife's faith outlook changed, we started going to Mass again, and we had our son baptized. Children are life changing events that God can use to bring people back to their faith. My wife wanted to do the right thing, and raise our children in the Church. I still wanted nothing to do with God, but I figured it was okay because going to church as a family was important. As the years went by my unhappiness grew. You start to look to people and things to fill the void that was meant only for God to fill. It caused friction in my marriage and family, because I became even more selfish and never satisfied. I had this notion that maybe I wasn't with my 'soulmate.' I was trying to pin all of the responsibility of my happiness on my wife, which is not what God intended, even in marriage.

In my early 30's, I had gone so far as to tell my wife that I was contemplating divorce. We both agreed to give it some time, maybe a year, to make sure that's what I really wanted (note the 'I' here, I wasn't thinking of anyone but myself). What I couldn't see was that only God can provide that peace in our hearts that brings about true happiness in our lives. Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God, the Bridegroom, has to be our 'soulmate.' It is only when we have a right relationship with the Holy Trinity, that we can have a right relationship with another person, especially your spouse. Marriage, rightly understood and lived, is supposed to be a sign that points to the relationship between Christ and the Church. Satan had his wall very high all around me and I couldn't see anything. My wife was very hurt, but so forgiving and loving.

As I reflect back on that time, I can see ever clearer how the Spirit must have been working in her. Her reaction, the way she treated me, and her willingness to stay with someone who said he didn't know if he loved her anymore, could only have come from God. She was a genuine Christian witness to me, not by pushing religion on me, but simply how she lived her life. I am thankful for God's persistent love for us, and how he shared that with me through my wife. God is the only one who can take a bad situation and bring about a miracle, which is what He did for our marriage and my dead spiritual state. My wife really relied on her faith in God for help when I told her I was contemplating divorce. God turned around the evil influences that I was allowing in our marriage, and used them to strengthen my wife

spiritually. Only God can turn evil back against Satan. Thank the Lord for His mercy and kindness.

Things in our marriage started to take a turn for the better, and our second son came along. I was still attending Mass with my family, but had never come back to God, nor into the Church. I even had a vain sense of pride about the way I could resist what I saw as superstitious religious stuff. Boy was I in for a surprise! As my first son got older and started receiving Communion, my pride fell away to embarrassment. Finally I decided to go through the Catholic Church's Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults (RCIA). Initially, it wasn't for any of the right reasons. Of course, the right reasons should have been a desire to let Him into my innermost being, should have been to give myself completely to Christ, should have been to put my faith in Him, should have been to ask for His mercy and grace. I just looked at it like I looked at going to Mass all those years, it was a good thing to do for my family, and I wouldn't feel so much like an outsider with my family at Church.

As I started RCIA, I felt this gentle tug at my heart; something told me that I needed to change. God takes whatever we are able to give, and His grace meets us where we are. Halfway through RCIA, I realized I wanted God back in my life! I missed the closeness to Him that I'd given up. I realized that all my unhappiness over the years was the natural longing built into every human being for their Creator. I gave my heart back to God, and He healed our marriage. The RCIA process drew me into the most loving and sincere relationship to God the Father, the Son, and Holy Spirit, that I'd ever experienced before. I realized that we can fall from grace; salvation is not assured if we turn our back on God. He never takes away our free will. God is a gentleman; He never forces Himself on us.

I also realized that He established His Church, loaded it with all kinds of unimaginable graces, especially through the sacraments, and His promise rings true that the gates of hell will never prevail against it! Now Jesus is present in my life both spiritually, and physically. The audacity of humility of our God to give himself to us under the appearance of bread and wine in the Holy Eucharist is indescribable. I started helping with the RCIA program afterwards, not because I know anything, but because I still have so much to learn, so much to grow, and because I can never do enough to repay what God has done for my family and me.

What I didn't know at that time was that God was preparing me with the tools I'd need spiritually and mentally to make it through a long separation from my family. In early 2003, I was mobilized and deployed to the Middle East. About a year and a half after going through RCIA, I found myself in Kuwait, just a couple days before the Iraqi war started. I didn't know how long I'd be there, or if and when I'd see my family again. At the beginning of the war, we faced a missile threat. There were days we'd have several warnings. For each one, we had to put chemical suits and masks on, and take shelter. Shelter was sometimes a small concrete bunker that was only designed for an indirect hit, in a direct or close hit it would have been no good. Sometimes shelter was simply near a wall in one of the large warehouses we were working in.

It was at those times that I think God was telling me that He was my true shelter. Everything was in His hands, and even if I didn't make it home, He would take care of my family. He had already shown me that by the miracle of saving my marriage. I didn't fear, because I knew He had a plan. I looked forward to Mass, because I knew my family was worshipping God in the same liturgy of God's Word and celebrating the same Eucharist that I was. I felt strongly connected to God, and through Him, to my family. That was awesome. It kept me stable when Satan was trying to tear me down in the loneliness of separation. I can't say I didn't fall. I had spiritual ups and downs, temptations, and struggles.

There were times I let my work become my God, and I did not give enough time to Him (actually, if I'm honest with myself, I still do that, my wife can attest to it). There were times I missed Mass out of laziness and self pity. There were times I didn't pray or read my Bible as I should have. There were periods when I doubted God. However, God always brought me back. He always seems to whisper in our innermost being, and if we listen, He is calling, telling us what we're doing wrong, so we can repent and let Him pour His grace into us. Through sincere repentance and in a true desire to turn away from our sins, the Divine Physician performs masterful work!

God convicts, we repent, go to the sacrament of confession, and He fills us with the graces we need to face the world again. Every time I go, I am amazed at God's mercy! There have been times when my experience is like the first salvation experience I had at age 11 in the Baptist church, like a load of bricks being lifted off my chest. Most often, the experience is not so emotional. However, I know nonetheless that God has forgiven me and is

pouring out the grace I need to do better. Every time I go to Confession, I feel much closer to God for it. The Eucharist just continues to grow in meaning for me. I can't even fathom the total gift of love that God makes to us, both spiritually and physically through His real presence. Our God is an awesome God!

In the Catholic Church, God has blessed us with the sacraments, which are very real and powerful ways He communicates His grace into our souls. If you don't believe that God can communicate Himself to us through the very materials and people He created, you haven't fully grasped what He did in the Gospels. We also are blessed with liturgy that lifts our heart to God, and many beautiful prayers, meditations, and devotions. In these last couple years after coming home from the deployment, I started meditating on the Rosary and the Way of the Cross. I always had strong reservations, especially about the Rosary, because of my years as a Protestant. However, I found out that the Rosary isn't a recital of a lot of dry repetitious prayers. It is a meditation on the Gospels, on different aspects of the life of Christ, on what He promises to us if we persevere. In the Rosary, we aren't worshipping Mary. Quite to the contrary, when we pray the Rosary, our Blessed Mother is on her knees next to us praying with us and for us! The Rosary, when prayed from the heart, leads us to Christ.

I didn't enter fully into the Catholic Church blindly. I know there are things in the past which were very wrong. However, I also know that wherever men are, there also will be evil. Church doctrine has never erred, but men in their sinfulness have misused their positions in the Church. St. Paul said in Philippians 2:12, "Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling." The Church is full of sinners, we're all sinners working out our salvation '...with fear and trembling.' The history of the Church is also full of some very great examples of saints who gave their all for God, not because they were so good but because they submitted to God and He did great things through them. Some of these saints even became martyrs for the faith. We see the scandals going on today. I know the media sensationalizes a lot, but I am also humble and thankful that the Holy Spirit is using this persecution to root out evil in the Church and make us stronger.

The Catholic Church teaches continual conversion and penance, which are not possible without God's grace, through the gift of the Holy Spirit. What I

understood as 'saved' in the Baptist Church, in the Catholic Church is taught as being in a state of grace (from which you can fall). God's gift of grace to us is freely given, but never forced upon us. He created us with free will, and He always respects our free choice. Unfortunately, sometimes we forget the consequences we are accepting when we reject His grace. As I reflect back on what I experienced as a teen, I realize that I had killed the grace of God in my soul by the choices I had made. Both times I was 'saved,' I experienced what the Catechism teaches as contrition, repentance, and conversion.

Para. 1490: The movement of return to God, called conversion and repentance, entails sorrow for and abhorrence of sins committed, and the firm purpose of sinning no more in the future. Conversion touches the past and the future and is nourished by hope in God's mercy.

Para. 1451: Among the penitent's acts contrition occupies first place. Contrition is "sorrow of the soul and detestation for the sin committed, together with the resolution not to sin again" (Council of Trent [1551]: DS 1676).

Unfortunately, I don't remember ever being encouraged to do an examination of conscience as a child, before my mom and I left the Catholic Church. Confession was something I only remember having done once, just before my first Holy Communion. It is so important for parents to properly instruct their children in the faith. They will only take it to heart as much as you do. They will only live it as well as you do. My faith in God did not become real to me until He was real to my mom. I am thankful for that, no matter what church it happened in. I believe Catholics and many of the Protestant denominations have much we could learn from one another, but we as Catholics cannot sacrifice Truth. We should all experience a deep sorrow in our souls for the way our sinfulness has rent the body of Christ. Our Lord prayed that we all be one. When will we heed His call?

During my yearlong deployment, I made a couple short trips into Iraq, but spent most of my time in Kuwait. I have to say as I reflect back on it, my experience then pales in comparison to what our soldiers are facing in Iraq today. We need to remember them and their families in our prayers, especially their children. I saw lives broken by divorce due to separation. It should evoke a deep sorrow in our souls to see how disposable our society views marriage and family today. That is directly reflected in the rise of

abortion, euthanasia, and divorce. We throw away God's graces and we don't even realize it.

Conversion is not something that happens just once as the 'once saved always saved' belief says, it is a path we must strive to follow our entire lives. There are times when God brings us along this path in giant leaps. These are very powerful experiences of His grace at particular times in our lives. However, I think the small baby steps that He helps us through are more the norm. I think if we could add up the baby steps, they'd far exceed the leaps, and if we could tally the grace along those baby steps, we'd be astounded at the unselfish love of our God. I still stumble and fall; I even take some backward steps and stray from the path. However, those are the times when His grace abounds all the more. Those are the times I can look back on, and see that the Good Shepherd was there, carrying me in His loving arms back to the fold. Sometimes, all I can do is cry and tell Him thank you.