

The Stirrings of the Holy Spirit

“But when he comes, the Spirit of truth, he will guide you to all truth.” (John 16: 13 NAB)

I have a notion that a good number of Catholics and people of other denominations for that matter have a difficult time recognizing when the Holy Spirit becomes quite prevalent in one's life. Having had an encounter with the third person of the Holy Trinity in the last two years, I can attest that this phenomenon can and does occur quite often as a matter of fact, but most of us are not open to it. Even I, as a Methodist for forty two years, and a Catholic prior to becoming Protestant, had not even begun to understand the stirrings of the spirit that would forever change my life and profoundly challenge my belief system. How does one describe this encounter?

It was during the summer of 2010 that I began to experience what I thought was just a crisis of faith which could easily have been remedied with some spiritual counseling or a weekend retreat, but in reality would take me on a journey not the least of which would turn my world completely upside down. It would leave those closest to me puzzled as to what had happened to the one person they thought “had it together” with regards to her faith belief.

I think the initial encounter really began a few years back when I had decided to attend divinity school because I felt I had been called into the ministry. My husband was in the latter part of his studies at seminary preparing to become a Methodist minister and having been involved in the Methodist Church for all our married life, I felt the stirrings of the heart to do something much more than the usual activities involving the church. There are married couples sharing in the ministry of many of the Protestant denominations; some as co-ministers in a church or in many cases each are assigned to pastor their own church.

Some choose to go into pastoral counseling, youth ministry, music ministry or hospital ministry. I was uncertain at the time just where I felt my particular ministry would be but knew I was called to work in some capacity in a church environment. I enrolled in two courses while working full time and fortunately our two children were fairly self-sufficient, so study in the evening or attendance at class was not an issue and both my husband and I shared in all the family activities as they occurred.

I have to admit at the time, my heart was not in my studies. I did fine and passed the semester but for whatever reason decided this was just not the place for me. I felt guilty about it as the process one goes through to even be accepted at seminary was somewhat involved and I also felt I had let those down that had written letters for me and recommended me to the program. But in all honesty I did not feel it was the right course of action for me.

So I became very involved in our home church as I have always been a “doer” of the word and channeled my efforts into the various ministries offered. At one time I was in the choir, in the bell choir, a Stephen's minister, belonged to bible studies when offered, participated in committee meetings as needed, Sunday school class president and the list goes on. I loved it and dug my heels in for the long haul.

It was during my time in Sunday school that I began to take a long hard look at just what I did believe. Years back I had attended a Baptist college to complete my Bachelor's degree and of course had to take both Old Testament and New Testament classes plus some "church history" thrown in on the side. I learned quite a bit about all the reformers and the whys and wherefores of the Reformation. It did not particularly cause any doubt in my mind at the time regarding my beliefs because I was focused on graduating.

I had been raised Catholic and lived the Catholic life up until I left home in the late 1960s. But none of this impacted my studies and I finally received my degree which improved my work status at a local pharmaceutical company in the area of clinical research. Life could not have been any better as now I had the degree I had set out to accomplish many years previous to this. I did not look back and at the same time felt I was fairly secure in my job which I was and would eventually retire from this company. In order to have been accepted into seminary though, I would have had to finish college so perhaps this was all in God's long range plan for me.

So it was within those Sunday school classes, that I began to feel the stirrings of the spirit again but still did not recognize it for what it was. I actually found myself defending various misconceptions with regards to the Catholic faith when someone in class would erroneously make a comment that I knew to be wrong. Usually the biggest topic of misconception was what they perceived to be worship of Mary.

I remember my husband quoting a Methodist minister friend of his saying "Catholics revere Mary too much and Protestants do not revere her enough". Now that I am Catholic, I do not think we revere her too much but it is difficult to explain to those of other faiths. These types of interactions would go on for quite a number of years. At the time I also would note when someone taught a class on scripture or church history, I began to question not only their belief but mine as well. I could not wrap my head around those who believed the "once saved always saved" notion (which is not a Methodist belief) and that nothing was required for salvation, other than affirming Christ as our personal savior and following his commandments.

The notion that scripture was the sole foundation of belief just somehow did not resonate with me either. Even though the Methodist church believes in Scripture and Tradition, our class was made up of various backgrounds of faith denominations and thus some of their beliefs were not in agreement with all the Methodist church teaches which can and does create disharmony within the Methodist beliefs.

It is no wonder there are so many denominations worldwide. When one individual stood up one Sunday morning in class and declared: "what I like about the Methodist Church is I can read a scripture passage and interpret it anyway I want", I then realized my beliefs were being challenged and I knew for me this would require some study and searching for just what I did believe.

This was a pivotal moment in my life. I came upon a quote recently by St. Augustine that I found to be quite profound in reference to my friend's comment: "If you believe what you like in the gospels, and reject what you don't like, it is not the gospel you believe, but yourself."

So with that in mind, access to my home laptop and armed with websites on Catholicism, I began to search for the truth. It amazed me and continues to amaze me at what is available on the web with regards to the Catholic Church. I found myself pouring over sites of historical evidence of the history of the church especially with respect to the church fathers, explanations of how scriptural the Mass was and what Vatican II changes had occurred while I was gone from the Church.

Of course not all of what is available on the web contained truths about the church but I became pretty good at sorting out the good from the bad. For the most part I was able to find out what it was I was looking for and found references I could purchase through various online bookstores if I wanted “hard” copies, such as Scott Hahn’s “Rome, Sweet Home” and other books of his, as well as books by Jeff Cavins, Michael Kelly and other converts.

I also read some texts which are what I refer to as classic Catholic literature by Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen, Henri Nowen and one of my all-time favorites, Thomas Merton. What a wealth of wonderful stories of people like me, who shared their experiences of what it was to be a part of this wonderful faith, Roman Catholicism. Now I knew what has commonly been referred to as Roman fever. I had it and my temperature spiked!

While this was occurring, the Holy Spirit began his relentless stirrings in my soul again. This time to the extent that I thought I was going to actually lose my mind. I was dazed and in a fog most of the time; forgetful and having anxiety attacks, to the point I had to seek medical help but lied about why I was having anxiety not only to my doctor but to my family as well. Unless one has experienced this phenomenon, then it is very difficult to explain. I knew in my heart I needed to do something soon but to add to the anxiety I did not know who to turn to or where to go to seek help.

I had attended Mass with my father and mother on occasion over the years but when anticipating a reconnection with the church, attendance for the first few times by myself left me feeling a little isolated and very alone. Unfortunately some Catholic Churches are just not very welcoming and having been accustomed to that friendly Protestant handshake as one enters their church, I found myself wondering at times why I was even at Mass. But as I was to mature in the faith over the next few months, I would begin to realize it is not about the friendly handshake or greeting at the door. It is more about what happens within the doors of the church and our worship of God through the liturgy.

Growing up as a Catholic in the 50s and 60s, there was a movement afoot to stray away from the traditional family values and norms and to accept a more “freer” way of thinking (commonly called bohemian thinking) and the old adage “my way or the highway” caused many of us to choose the “highway”. I know that out of my Catholic grammar school class, when we gathered for a reunion a number of years ago, only one or two had continued in the faith.

The rest, disillusioned with the church, had sought different denominations and in some cases Hinduism and Buddhism as a way to channel their beliefs into something more tangible and fulfilling than what they or we perceived the Catholic Church could provide. This was the age of the “flower children”, Timothy O’Leary, Rock and Roll, the Beatles, anti-war protests and the

beginnings of a drug and alcohol culture that still to this day pervades our society and has caused “drug wars” along our southern border. Also at this time, there was or appeared to be as a counter attack to this way of life; a revitalization of some Protestant denominations and many youth in my time became involved in those churches that offered to its young people a new way to look at the bible and Christ.

I know a number of my friends joined Campus Crusade for Christ, Young Life or Up with People (which I auditioned for and was accepted but my parents intervened). The Billy Graham crusades were very popular and many would talk of having had the “altar call” during his impressive sermons. When I left home to “fly the friendly skies”, I strayed even further from the church because as an “on call” reserve flight attendant, weekends were usually spent in the sky. Mass was not an option. Saturday Masses did not exist and quite frankly I was too busy with my new found career to be bothered with it.

There was a certain amount of guilt associated with my choices at first, but it quickly faded away as I drifted further and further apart. It was at this time I was first introduced to a Protestant church through another flight attendant who was Lutheran. I went a few times with her and liked what I saw and heard. I had now been introduced to another denomination and found it to be not so unlike the Catholic Church and much easier to follow.

My parents were converts to the Catholic faith in the early 50s and thus very involved in the church and made sure all of us had our sacraments and catechism classes growing up. Mass was every Sunday without fail, rosary as a family at least once a week, confession a couple of times a month and overall our childhood was pretty much governed by the church.

I suspect this is what would bring me and one of my sisters back into the fold years down the road. How could it not? Forever there would be the Holy Spirit, embedded in us from Confirmation, molding and shaping us throughout our lives. I did not come to recognize Him until much later. Little did I know at the time though, he was with me all along on this journey. He never gave up on me!

So, as I began to realize the stirrings of the Spirit were not going away and in addition to my quest to seek out the truth, it became apparent I needed to find someone to help me find my way back into the church. My younger sister had in the meantime the year prior to this, returned to the church and as I found out later, had prayed for me that very summer of my “discontent”. But I did not want any of my extended family to know what I was doing. I did not want encouragement or discouragement from anyone. I had to do this on my own. I did mention it to my husband, who at the time was supportive of whatever I felt I had to do and my daughter, who very profoundly said “It’s your soul mom; you have to do what you feel you need to do”. Aside from those individuals, no one knew.

With that support in mind, I had searched and found a website that I was able to initially find out more about what it was I was seeking and also helped me in the mechanics of what it would take to re-enter into full communion with the Catholic Church. This website was also able to help put some of my fears at rest with regards to those first ‘baby steps’ I had to take in order to start the process of reconnection with the church.

I had the unfortunate experience of contacting a local parish about all of this at this same time and received some misinformation but fortunately knew enough not to take their word for it. With the help of the website and the pursuit of another parish I had looked at online, I found the connection I needed to complete the requirements for my return. Fortunately one of the women I had met through a prison ministry, I was and still am involved with, was their Adult Faith Formation and Outreach Ministries Director and I subsequently met with her to start the process.

I started attending Mass and eventually went to confession which terrorized me at first. I remember asking the priest if he wanted me to confess all forty-five years of my sins. I could tell by the look in his eyes, I did not have to confess a long laundry list of my sinful past. Since I had all my sacraments in order, I only needed what is called *Sanatio in Radice*, which basically acknowledges my marriage to be valid in the eyes of the church. That is putting it in simple terms but once this document was approved, I could then receive the Eucharist at Mass. This would occur Passion weekend in 2011.

I will never forget that encounter with Christ. It will be with me for the rest of my life as I had hungered for it during those few short weeks while waiting for my marriage to be valid. It was a longing for that which I could not have but when fulfilled brought me to the realization that this was where I truly belonged.

It was also during this time, the reality of what I had done began to weigh on my husband. Although supportive of my desire to become Catholic again, he felt abandoned, as anyone would in this situation. We had shared forty-one years of marriage in the same faith tradition and now that was changing. I felt the strong call of God back into the church and knew I could not ignore that call.

As the gospel according to Mark reads: “Peter began to say to him, “We have given up everything and followed you.” Jesus said, “Amen, I say to you, there is no one who has given up house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands for my sake and for the sake of the Gospel who will not receive a hundred times more now in this present age; houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions, and eternal life in the age to come.” But many that are first will be last and the last will be first.” (Mark 10:28-31 NAB) This can and is a difficult passage for many and I realized just what my faith change would mean to many in my family that are Protestant, but as I mentioned above I could not ignore that relentless call of the spirit.

There are some distinct differences between Methodist and Catholic beliefs, communion being one of them and this was and is still difficult for my husband. I cannot partake with him and he cannot partake with me per Church canon law: “Catholic ministers may lawfully administer the sacraments only to Catholic members of Christ’s faithful, who equally may lawfully receive them only from Catholic ministers.” (Canon # 844.1) They have two sacraments, those being Baptism and Communion and of course we have seven.

They believe in the Trinity as do we; that scripture is divine and inspired and sin does corrupt and separate us from God but believe people make their own choices because of God’s divine

grace. They obviously do not believe in the Magisterium of the Catholic Church but do have a Book of Discipline that basically defines their belief system. But aside from those distinct differences, overall the similarities in a belief in our Lord and Savior, love of the Lord and our neighbor and adherence to His commands and precepts are still what connect us as a couple.

I am sure he longs for the day when we shared the same faith and I long for the day when he might take more of an interest in mine but overall we will weather this as we have those other difficulties encountered throughout our married life and will continue to live out our days in love for one another. I am reminded of a quote by John Wesley when speaking of the diversity of faith beliefs, said: "Though we may not think alike, may we not love alike."

I still enjoy our Sunday school and attend the Methodist church with my husband Sunday mornings. Though difficult at times for me, I feel strongly we must remain spiritually connected in whatever form or fashion it takes. Thankfully there is Saturday evening Mass as well as Sunday evening Mass and I try to attend at least once during the week. I did receive a few raised eyebrows but for the most part my Methodist friends turn to me with those questions about the Catholic faith that tend to come up in conversation.

These dear friends have been with us since our children were little, growing up in Sunday school together, vacation bible school, summer camps and mission trips. All these would give our children a foundation of faith for their future and subsequently they would pass this on to our grandchildren. We have all been through "thick and thin"; providing meals when someone is ill or in the hospital; prayers for surgeries, deaths and family problems; serving meals at the local Samaritan House for patients with HIV and AIDS; building Habitat for Humanity houses and so on. One does not wipe away that which memories of Christian love are built on.

I cannot forget it was the Methodist Church that brought me to this part of my life. I have had and continue to have many minister friends both men and women who have a great love of the Lord. They are just as devout in their faith as I am in mine. It was a foundation on which I would build my future with the Catholic faith.

I started with prison ministry in the Methodist church and continue to fulfill that part of my ministry within the framework of the Catholic Church. It defines who I am as a Christian; bringing the love of God to those who otherwise feel the world has turned their backs on them. It continues to fulfill that part of me so much so that I cannot imagine doing any other ministry at this time of my life. I am in a ministry that I feel can make a difference.

I am part of a one on one mentoring through the Life Connections Program at the Federal prison and as part of group leadership in "Why Catholic" programs as well. As one author of an article entitled "A Working Theology of Prison Ministry" (Stephen T. Hall, D. Min. Fall 2004, Vol.58, No. 3) said: "A reoccurring theme in pastoral counseling with prisoners is the feeling that they have been forsaken by God, that they are alone. Without hope people are without help."

I am reminded of that scripture in Matthew: "For I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, a stranger and you gave me no welcome, naked and you gave me no clothing, ill and in prison, and you did not care for me." (Matthew 25: 42-43 NAB)

Having been involved in this ministry I can without a doubt assure those who find this ministry difficult, that it gives as much to me as I give to it and that is an unconditional love for those who are the “least of these”.

Among all of the ups and downs of the return to the church there have been those humorous times which give me fond memories of laughter. I remember when I was wrestling with the Holy Spirit considering a return to the church and suffering from much anxiety and distress. I was trying to put together a meal one evening using our outdoor gas grill and attempted to light the grill with a match while the gas was turned on! My husband calmly reminded me it was a gas grill. Had contact been made with the gas and the lit match, I might have “gone to glory” as some of my Protestant friends would say.

Or the time I went to communion, probably about the third or fourth time after Passion Sunday, I was so excited that, instead of allowing the Eucharistic minister to put the host in my hand, I reached up and took it out of his. (Thankfully it was not one of the priests or I would have sought out another church). Or most recently during Lent I kept putting my finger in the holy water fount to cross myself and it was dry and I was thinking to myself “why don’t these people put holy water in the bowls?”

It only took until Passion Week to remember why there was no holy water available. It only occurred to me in the last few months that the numbers on a board in front of the church are for the specified hymn numbers for that particular Saturday or Sunday Mass, not a count of how many people were in church for each Mass as is recorded on boards in many Protestant services. Unfortunately for most of us who do return to the church, it is assumed we remember everything from our childhood, which we do not. I also recently discovered I have accumulated approximately seventy-two Catholic books over the last two years; enough for a small church library. I have not crossed myself in the Methodist church when I attend with my husband nor genuflected but I’ve come close. Laughter is good for the soul and one must have this to keep sanity when Catholic in a Protestant family.

The stirrings of the Holy Spirit were fulfilled Pentecost Sunday (May 2012), when I became a sponsor for a young lady being confirmed. As it turns out she is a returning Catholic as well so we share a common thread. Having been confirmed at a young age, it was a renewal for me and I could feel the Holy Spirit’s presence around and through me as we stood before the priest when she received the sacrament.

I am now in the process of studying Ignatian spirituality and learning discernments of the spirits, *Lectio Divina* and meditative exercises that put me closer to God daily as well as bible studies through the church. In reading Cardinal Timothy M. Dolan’s book “To Whom Shall We Go?” he speaks of ways to bring us closer in love of the Lord. One of the ways in getting to know the Lord better, he writes, “Now, what does it mean to get to know Jesus better? It means reading scripture; it means reading the Catechism; it means spiritual reading”. Well, with seventy-two books, two Catechisms and the Scripture, how could I not get to know Jesus better!

It is amazing the small miracles I continue to have through prayer and focusing on Him in all that I do. I was once asked what excites me and I have to say this church excites me. I continue to

thank God daily for having brought me back into this amazing spirit filled church. I continue to draw strength from those in my parish who have helped guide me in this walk though some will never know who they were. The Franciscan friars who have patiently answered my questions or concerns will forever be close to my heart

I know the church suffers in many areas in our broken world but I also know it survives the test of time. I have the confidence and faith to know without a doubt this is the church founded by Christ and I am excited to be a part of it. This is the truth of what the Holy Spirit has laid on my heart. I continue to look forward to learning all I can for as long as I can; hoping to serve Him until I draw my last breath.