

Testimony of my Christian experience.

My experience as a Christian began as a child when I was baptised. At age seven I received instructions in my faith as a Roman Catholic in order to receive the sacraments of First Reconciliation and Communion.

We continued to attend Mass as a family whilst I was growing up, mainly to worship and praise as part of the Catholic Community where I lived but also because my mother had a very deep faith and relationship with Christ which she wanted us children to have as well. My father and my siblings did have faith but I really found everything so much more interesting than they seemed to.

For some reason the words of the scripture readings made sense, the beauty of a God that became man and born into lowly poverty in a stable or cave whilst on the run from the authorities who were trying to kill him seemed to make profound sense to me. I also remember meditating on the words and sentiment of the Lord's Prayer during the Mass one time and reflecting that it was a "perfect prayer, utterly complete". I was seven years old.

After I left school and went into full-time work, I suffered a lot of untreated and undiscovered mental health issues (depression, anxiety, neuroses and phobias). Also, I was abused and mentally, verbally and physically bullied and I became disillusioned with life, so I turned to alcohol and drugs and away from my Christian upbringing and left that all behind.

After years of chaos and misery and consequences, I was touched by grace. My partner said she wanted to take our two children to Mass, in order to get to know our local priest so that we could have our sons baptised. I agreed to come along. I am glad I did.

We had to walk to Church as I didn't drive then, I wasn't working and we couldn't afford the bus. So, we walked a mile and a half with two pushchairs and we were a little late as Mass had started. When we got into Church the priest was reading this passage from the Gospel of Luke:

"Then Jesus told them this parable: "Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Doesn't he leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbours together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.' I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent." (Luke 15: 3-8).

I felt that I had been touched by grace, an immense feeling of joy and gratitude came over me. I also felt sorry for my sins and when the part of the liturgy came for everyone to kneel at the consecration of the Eucharist, I offered myself to Jesus and asked him to forgive me of all my sins and help me to change my life as I had been so unhappy for so long. I felt hope. I felt re-born but I knew there was a lot of work to do.

So, I started this work, first with lots and lots of prayers (the three basic prayers to begin with: the Hail Mary, The Glory be and of course, The Lord's prayer, repeated over and over, at home, at work, on the bus, anywhere. I knew I needed to strengthen my connection with God.). Then, by attending our Parishes weekly scripture study group which helped me enormously. My faith kept growing, so I prayed more and read the Bible and books by Christian authors and it kept growing. That was over six years ago.

I continued to attend different services at our parish and others near where I lived and where I was working. Almost every day I was in church, praying the Rosary, worshipping in adoration, Benediction and Holy Mass.

I have also found the Sacrament of Reconciliation (or Confession) tremendously healing. When I was able to overcome my pride and tell a priest *everything* over the course many confessions and which took some months and lots of prayers asking for the courage to confess all the sins of my life, I felt like a huge, dirty, poisonous lead cloak that had been dragging me down for years had been lifted from my shoulders.

I stopped using recreational drugs but I could not stop the drinking completely and I had to go to the Twelve Step fellowships for help with that. But also attended a sixteen week course at the Holy Trinity Brompton, London: the 12 Steps with Jesus "Recovery Course" and I found this illuminating and very healing.

After a year in recovery, I met a fellow Christian who is the London and Southern England area Co-ordinator of the Calix Society, an organisation for Catholic Alcoholics that promotes the spiritual growth of its members and evangelises those who may have come to 12 Step fellowships in order to get well but have not been able to reconcile the "Higher Power" found in the 12 Step programme as Jesus Christ.

I have been active in Calix for almost three years now and am almost four years sober. I have formed and led two Calix groups with the help of the Southern area Co-ordinator and others. As well as this, I have volunteered as a wheelchair pusher, bringing Christian people to the Sunday Worship service at our local hospitals, St Barnabas Chapel.

I continue to take an active role in 12 Step fellowships, Calix and my local Parish Church, I have attended modules and short courses on the Christian Faith, Theology, Spirituality and Psychology, and I would like to get more involved in Pastoral Ministry as I have a passion for my faith and I have a passion and zeal to help others to come to Christ, so that he may heal and transform their lives as he has mine and countless others I have witnessed since I commenced this dedicated walk with Him.

Martin Cosgrove.