

My Journey to Christ

by: Melinda Norcross

Who would have ever thought, that a Jewish girl from New York City, raised in orthodox yeshivas (Hebrew schools), would have found Christ. Well, in some ways, it is not as far-fetched as it seems, and, in other ways it is very “far out”.

In February of 2000, I met a man on a plane. His name is Mark. We had one of those 3.5-hour conversations that feel like 3 minutes, and began dating. In June of that year, I called him up on a Sunday morning, and said, “What are you doing today?” He replied, “I am going to church.” I thought to myself, well, I have fallen for this guy, I better learn about his religion. So I went to my first Catholic mass.

I think it was at that moment, when I emerged from church that first day with Mark, that I was called to Christ, although I certainly did not recognize it at the time. I was full of questions! What is this, why do they do this, what is that, what does this mean, 50 questions.

Thankfully, Mark was raised Italian Catholic in Italy, and knew all the answers. So each week, it became a ritual, I found myself wanting to go! Pretty soon I was calling him up saying, what are we doing this weekend, and, oh, we better not schedule anything when mass is being held! I was hooked.

Please understand I had been struggling with my Jewish faith for the past 13 years or so. For me to want to go to church, or any religious service, was a conversion in itself.

Then, in September, the choir started up. Having a deep background in music, was I ever excited. In November, I turned to Mark and said, Mark, do you think they would let me join since I am not Catholic? He said, “Sure they would, call them up.” Well, I did, and sure enough, Anita, the choir director, said, sure, come on up. She began calling me her little Jewish girl.

I continued to attend church every week till the following summer, 2001. Now, the amazing thing was, I was teaching Hebrew at the Lubavitch School and shul right down the street! I was teaching Hebrew and Creation from 9-10:45 a.m., and then running to mass for 11 am each Sunday. The whole time I kept saying, "There is no way I am converting though!"

In July of 2001, I was slowly considering RCIA. Then, suddenly, on August 7, my mother died in her sleep. Did you know that Jews call dying in your sleep ‘a sweet kiss from G-d’? Moses died that way; he went to take a nap in the late afternoon, and never woke up. Anyway, I went with my three sisters to my mother’s home to observe Shiva,

the seven-day period of mourning. When I arrived at my mother's house, the first thing I did was grabbed a bunch of her clothes, laid down on her bed where she died, and started singing, "Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so...."

Now, to take a tangent, my mother was born protestant and converted to Judaism when my father asked him to marry her. Her grandfather was a prominent minister in Evanston, IL for many years at St. Peter's Church. Despite this deeply Christian upbringing that my mother had, my father insisted we were to be raised Jewish. He sent us to prominent yeshivas in Monsey, NY, Toronto, and Miami Beach. I learned to speak Hebrew fluently, and studied Torah, Rashi, Gomorrah, Talmid, Kabala and Navi. My mother still managed to sneak in a Christmas tree and Easter baskets at home, but they had no meaning to Jesus when I was growing up. It was my grandmother who taught me the Jesus loves me song.

Anyway, as I sat around with my sisters mourning my mother, I dreamt of going to mass in the local church. I did, and it brought me great peace. Jesus came to me in a dream two nights after my mother died, and held his arms out to me, indicating to me that it was ok for me to seek Him for comfort and solace. I found that I only felt peace when I sought out Jesus at church, in the rosary, or in prayer. It was clear that I was destined to become a Catholic Christian.

I returned to my job in September 2001, and of course 9/11 happened. I hoped that the reason the L-rd took my mom was so that she could help Him with all the new people in Heaven that day. My mom was a nurse, you see, so it made sense.

I attended church weekly for the next year, and in September of 2002, I decided to go through RCIA. I joined up at St Kathryn's parish in Hudson, NH. Father Gary Belliveau was so nice, he welcomed me into his fold, and encouraged me to seek out Jesus, without quieting or suppressing whatever came up from my Jewish side.

Serendipity, my father called me in November and asked me to go to Rome. Now, the miracle here is I had not told him that I was going to be baptized. He would not have been happy. He was raised orthodox Jewish. I agreed voraciously to go, deciding I would tell him of my decision on the plane ride and let him see for himself while we were in Rome how I had grown with Christ in my life. Here is where the story really gets interesting. I informed him I wanted to go to High Mass at Basilica Di San Pietro (St. Peter's) (The Vatican) on Sunday. It was the Feast of Jesus' Baptism. He of course, did not want to go. The bell captain at the hotel told me mass started at 10 am. So, at 9:40 am, I left the hotel to walk to the basilica.

I arrived at 9:50 am to find the pews nearly empty. Something was wrong with that, so I asked one of the guards in rather broken Italian what was up. He informed me

that mass started at 10:30 am. So I took a seat in one of the pews and broke out my rosary beads and a little book to help me pray the Scriptural Rosary, my favorite.

Not two minutes later, a man approached me in a business suit. He said something in Italian about “reading in English.” I took him to mean that he was offering to take me somewhere to hear the day’s readings in English. This would be great, I thought, since Mark had warned me that they would most likely be in Italian or Latin. So, I followed this man and he handed me a red velvet-bound book. Sure enough, there were the day’s readings, in English. I read them once and handed the book back to him. Then he said, “No, you read several times.” To which I thought, oh, I only get one shot at this, I have to read them enough times to remember the gist of the story so when they are read in Italian, I can understand what is being said. So I sat down and read the readings again, three or four times. Then I stood up and handed the book back to him. He said, “OK, now you come with me.” What he then proceeded to show me was how to proceed up to the altar to DO the second lector reading for the day.

PANIC ATTACK! Wait! I thought to myself, I am not baptized! I am Jewish! Is this allowed? Then I thought, well, Jesus was Jewish, we are just going to have to work this thing out. So I did it, I read at The Vatican, on the Feast of Jesus’ baptism. What a gift from God this was; I was sure it was a sign He was happy I was getting baptized and had chosen Christ. I ran back to the hotel to tell my father.

“Daddy, Daddy, guess what happened.” I told him the story. Well, he immediately turned to me and said, “Oh, yeah, Melinda, I have been meaning to talk to you about that, I do not want you to go through with it.” POW! Now what was G-d trying to tell me? I went back to RCIA with mixed feelings. I told my brothers and sisters in the program to pray for me, because I honestly did not know at that time if I would be with them at Easter Vigil.

Slowly over the next three months, I prayed harder than I ever have in my whole life. Each day, I kept a journal, I went to mass, and talked to G-d and Jesus. I asked them to guide me to what they wanted for me. Well, a quiet voice emerged from the depths and told me it was ok. On Good Friday, I went to visit the tomb at church in the middle of the night, and stayed for three hours. I prayed to Jesus, His lonely statue lying there in the tomb, “I leave my sins in your tomb O’ Lord, I leave my sins in your tomb.” I knew I was ready. I did it; I got baptized.

It did not stop there. The local paper ran an article on Easter Sunday (The Nashua Telegraph, April 20, 2003) on three local people who had chosen Catholicism later in life, even though the pedophile scandal had happened. One of the people they chose to interview was I. I had a 10 inch color photo of myself on the front page of the Sunday paper holding a palm on Palm Sunday. Fr. Gary reported later that he got over a dozen calls from people asking to come in to find out more about the church.

He said that the article prompted them to call. I had already begun to mission, and I had only been a Catholic for one day.

I just passed my year anniversary for my baptism. I was asked by my parish to put on a truly authentic Seder during Holy Week for 50 people. It was a huge hit. People were coming up to me crying, saying that I had changed them forever, that they would never approach Eucharist the same again. I felt so truly blessed to be a vessel of God's word in such a profound way.

I feel that a merging of Jewish roots and Catholic doctrine can strengthen the future of the Catholic Church. I want to educate all Catholic people on their Jewish roots, to help people feel Jewish. Jesus was, after all, Jewish. Not sure how this will play out, but the opportunities are endless.

Maybe this is the making of a new show on your channel, "Jewish Roots."