

My Conversion Story
By Patti Defilippis

I've found, as a convert, that I never escape the feeling that I am stranger in a foreign country. No matter how long I've lived in the Catholic Church, and I've lived here for twenty-three years, I am not a native speaker of the language. Sometimes I just don't understand the dialect, exactly what certain expressions of faith mean. Yet, because I have chosen this Faith, and I embrace it completely, I go through the motions of the rituals and devotions, trust in God to fill them with meaning.

Saint Therese speaks to my immigrant's heart when she says, "I sing what I WANT TO BELIEVE. She understands that feeling is not the essence of faith, an action of the will is the essence.

As I look back over my faith life, I realize the Saint Therese of Lisieux has been my friend and helpmate every step of the way. She has taught me to become the child I was before sin and corruption entered my heart.

I grew up in a Presbyterian household, and I was, like Therese, "happiest in the confines of my family." My early childhood, like hers, was a bright and cheery period of innocence. But in my teenage years I went adrift, and I focused my heart, not on pleasing God, but on finding love and affirmation from my peers and from the applause of a theater audience.

Throughout all of high school, college, and my early career as an actress, I was in grave moral danger, immersed in the decadent world of theater. I had no moral compass. So many people I know, who grew up Catholic and then messed up their lives in the rudderless era of the 1970's, at least knew that there was such a thing as sin. I don't remember every being aware of such an absolute value. That God preserved me from the obvious consequences of such foolishness is my constant source for gratitude. I think that He protected me out of His mercy, for he knew that through it all I was searching for the Truth. I compare this period of my life to the time in Saint Therese's life when she suffered a nervous collapse over the loss of her sister. This was, for her, so unlike me because she remained virtuous, also a time of temptation and darkness.

In 1980, I came finally to the Oregon Shakespeare Festival in Ashland, Oregon, where I was hired as a member of the acting company. I remember getting off the plane in Medford, Oregon, and having an overwhelming sense that I had come home. I think this was because the dark period of my life was about to end.

It was in Ashland that I met Leonardo Defilippis, also an actor in the Festival company. Here was someone unlike any person I had encountered before – A man of faith, who led a disciplined life in the midst of the decadence. This was remarkable to me. I wanted to

know why this man, instead of heading out to socialize with the cast after a show, would go home at night, and get up early to go to daily mass. I was looking for Truth, but I was also looking for order, and the idea of something that would make one get up early in the morning intrigued me. In my searching mode, I began to talk to him, and he invited me to attend mass with him one morning.

At that early morning mass, I, who knew nothing, or very little of the theological truths of the Catholic Faith, understood that this was where the Truth was, and that it was where I belonged. Still clinging to my theater career goals, I entered the Church at Easter of 1981. God was drawing me into a deeper vocation, and it was only gradually that He revealed to me an understanding of the Truths that I accepted wholeheartedly at that time.

Then I met Saint Therese of Lisieux, reading her *Story of a Soul*. Although it was a very flowery, Victorian book, I was deeply struck by what she had to say. It resonated with me – that it was in little things that the way to heaven lay. Saint Therese gave me the courage to make little steps. I began to live with a moral compass at the moment of my decision to become a Catholic, and to seek God’s Will above all things. However, my conversion was only partially completed by my entrance into the Catholic Church. I was still very immature, and again I compare my journey to that of Therese. When she was miraculously cured after her nervous illness, by the smile of the Virgin Mary, she still remained centered on herself. So did I.

For two more years, my relationship with Leonardo grew, as he embarked on spiritual journey that took him in a new direction, producing live dramas on the Gospels and the saints. I directed his shows, shared in the writing, and traveled with him as he performed, operating the lights and sound. Throughout this time we were discussing marriage, but he was still thinking about the priesthood. Basically my attitude was, “I will marry you and leave my promising career behind. You just have to make a commitment, since I am willing to sacrifice so much for you.” What a difficult position this put him in! If he chose to marry me, he would have to accept responsibility for the end of my acting career – giving me great ammunition for later on, when I needed something to blame him for any unhappiness in my life! It was an immature demand for me to make. I was very frustrated with his inability to make the leap, and so I left Oregon, and went to work at a Shakespeare Festival in Fort Worth, Texas for the summer.

At the end of my contract with the Fort Worth Shakespeare Festival, I was still in great turmoil over my relationship with Leonardo. Knowing little about monasteries, only that it would be a good place to go for a retreat, I went to the Carmelite monastery of nuns, then located in Fort Worth. I had never met a cloistered nun before, so I was surprised when the mother superior came into the parlor to visit me on the other side of a heavy metal grill. Undaunted, I told her my story and dilemma, and breaking down in tears I said, “Oh, Mother, maybe I’m called to be a nun!” She must have been laughing inside at this silly, mixed-up girl, but she said to me kindly, “You know, being unhappy in love is

not generally an indication of a religious vocation.” She saw how torn up I was, and she promised to pray for me.

Off I went on a 3500-mile road trip by myself through the Midwest, auditioning for numerous prestigious regional theaters. I was determined to pursue my career, and this was the way to do it. What a lonely time in the desert that was! I would drive along for miles with tears pouring down my cheeks, crying out to God for help and direction. At the end of this journey, my mother whisked me and my brother and sister away for a vacation in a seaside resort in Mexico. It was there, in that beautiful restful place, that my conversion reached it’s climax, and I received the grace that has helped me understand Therese’s conversion at Christmas. My conversion was instantaneous, and like her, in an instant I grew up.

My sister was reading me the Psalms to me in our hotel room. Suddenly everything changed, and I felt enormous peace and overwhelming joy enter my soul. I had a revelation - In that moment I knew what I was to do with my life: I wanted to go to Heaven, and I must find the shortest way to get there. Nothing else mattered. The logical thing to do would be to find that short way. That short way was with Leonardo. He would help me, and I must travel with him. In a word, I received my vocation. I attribute this remarkable grace to the intercession of Saint Therese, for I know those Carmelite nuns were praying for me, and this was the answer to their prayers.

For three days I walked around Mexico with a joy that was almost unbearable. I, not an early riser by nature, would get up to watch the sunrise. Everything was beautiful to me, and I was so sure of my vocation that I came very close to buying a Mexican wedding dress just to prove that I knew all along what was to come! When I came home, I called Leonardo and told him that I was coming back, and instead of having to beg me to stay, he was going to have to tell me to leave. This totally changed everything in our relationship, and I returned to Oregon to direct and tour with his new Saint Francis drama, and later to help produce the video of the same show, before we were married the in the summer in 1983.

Through twenty-one years, seven children, eight live dramas, five videos and one feature film, I have never looked back. My life has been an adventure. I gave up my career in theater with my whole heart to do the will of God, and look what He has given back to me. Who would have dreamed that such a sacrifice would yield so many creative opportunities. I would never have done any of the things I have done in this ministry, particularly the writing and film directing, if it had not been His work. This also is like Therese. God used her hiddenness to do great things.

The greatest professional opportunity that God has given to me is the writing of the screenplay for our new feature film, THERESE. I am overwhelmed by the fact that God has placed such confidence in me. But I do think that I know Therese, and that because I

have lived with her for so long and meditated on her little way for ordinary people to get to heaven, God has created, through me, an honest, true portrait of this beloved saint.

That is the way it is for all of us, especially women. We give up so much by embracing the Christian life of a wife and mother, but so often God gives us back more opportunities than we could ever have imagined or achieved on our own. Thanks be to God for His infinite mercy to me, for without him I could have fallen very low.