

Master, To Whom Shall I Go?



Then many of his disciples who were listening said, "This saying is hard; who can accept it?" ~John 6: 60

As a result of this, many of his disciples returned to their former way of life and no longer accompanied him. ~ John 6:66

Jesus then said to the Twelve, "Do you also want to leave me?" Simon Peter answered him, "Master, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life." ~ John 6:68



I had a choice to make. I could either obey by taking a step of faith with unknown consequences or I could be one of those disciples who leaves Jesus because believing was just too hard and asked too much.

Following Jesus into the Catholic Church would mean leaving my husband and my entire multi-generational Episcopalian family behind. It most certainly would disrupt my profession as a Family Nurse Practitioner. I had no assurance of the future. Therefore, I had to be convinced intellectually and spiritually that the Catholic Church was everything it said it was. I could not believe as a Catholic and remain Episcopal. The Church doctrines had to make incontrovertible sense to me. The Heavenly Father thankfully created me and knew how to speak to my heart and mind. He knew what it would take to bring me home. And He brought me specific mentors along the way. Bob Geiger through the Coming Home Network became an invaluable guide and spiritual mentor.

My life before this moment had been one of great stability. Though I was born and raised in California, my family traveled every summer back to my parent's ranches and home places in South Dakota. The summer days were filled with riding horses, swimming creeks, brandings, rodeos and occasionally pow wows and Sundances. My parents finally moved back bringing my brother and I to South Dakota. Though we attended college and traveled we made our homes in western South Dakota as well. It wasn't always easy. This can be a harsh place to live with the vast open spaces and hard cold winters. But the freedom of this life holds our hearts.

After graduating from college as a Registered Nurse, I lived independently. Eventually, I returned home marrying my “best friend” whom I had known for years. I loved being the mother of my two children, Arne III and Skye. I remained at home but it was not without criticism and shaking of heads by my previous professional colleagues. It served to illuminate a defining difference of how I wanted to live. The reality of how contemporary social wisdom attempts to influence one’s values was made quite clear to me. We moved to Kadoka, SD in the midst of western South Dakota and settled in. During this time we worked in youth ministry, spending our summers in the Black Hills for 10 years. Later, I returned to graduate school to become a Family Nurse Practitioner. In addition, I began teaching graduate school in the College of Nursing at South Dakota State University. My children grew up and went on to college. Our extended family remained close as we enjoyed family holidays, shared triumphs and grief, graduations and weddings. I even dreamt of one day becoming an Episcopal Priest. I was happily married for 25 years and then the unthinkable happened! My life’s search for meaning was not over. I was about to embark on a journey that could change everything.

In looking back, I realize that I have always been drawn to the Catholic Church. But being a “High Church” cradle- Episcopalian was very comfortable and deceptively easy to feel that I was all ready home. The motivation to endure any sacrifice to become Catholic is undermined because one is misled into thinking that one is all ready home in the Episcopal church . However, the more I studied, the more I realized, that my assumptions were flawed.

One of the high points drawing me on my journey started when I heard a nun talking on television about Jesus and his sacrifice being outside space and time. I hadn’t been paying any attention but the subject matter grabbed my interest. I stopped. What is a nun doing talking about Einsteinian theory of space and time and quantum physics? I sat down and listened to what I heard as a profound description of Christ’s crucifixion being ever-present at the Mass and why Jesus is not repetitively sacrificed. I was intrigued. That nun was Mother Angelica and the network was EWTN. I found The Journey Home program and began watching it. I found it intriguing to see why others chose to leave their lives of comfort and convert to Catholicism. It was then I started seriously wondering what would happen to my life if I converted.

And so began 18 months of intensive reading on everything I could find about the doctrines of the Catholic Church. What a relief to find out that the Church welcomes reason and faith. My respect for Pope John Paul II blossomed. I felt close to him when I found he became Pope on my birthday. What wonderful surprises were discovered in Pope John Paul II's encyclicals, especially his writings on the meaning of suffering in *Salvifici Doloris*, the creation of the Luminous Mysteries, and *Mulieris Dignitatum* revealed an abiding respect and dignity of women. What clarity and poetic vision I found in *Veritas Splendor*.

Foundational reassurance continued when I read the Early Church Fathers and Mothers. This church drew knowledge from Aristotle and natural law to Thomas Aquinas in discussing morality. Patrick Madrid's *Surprised by Truth* series captured my imagination as I related to those who had converted. Scott Hahn, Steven Ray, Father Groeschel were wonderful apologists and teachers.

But then came the questions. Why NOT ordain women for the priesthood. Why would I have to accept a fallible leader's decision on anything because he was a Pope? How can I devote my heart to Mary when I had lost my own mother who is dearer than I can explain; whose loss was tragically heartbreaking. How can I accept purgatory? I needed to learn what these doctrines truly meant.

I have always felt the closeness of God and his presence has been made known to me experientially throughout my life. I felt drawn to find out more about the Catholic doctrine. I contemplated for months before sending an inquiry to the Coming Home Network to ask questions about what I was reading. I fought the inclination and talked myself out of it many times. My hesitation came from the fact that I knew deep in my heart that I may be at the point of no return all ready but I didn't want to acknowledge it yet. I didn't want to lose my hope that I may become a priest. I didn't want to find out that there were actual rational answers to my questions.

I began visiting with my family. We are a close family of grandparents, spouses, siblings, nieces, nephews, sons and daughters. We all worshipped in the Episcopal Church for many generations and can trace them back to the American Revolution and the Mayflower. (Some members of my extended family, however, are Catholic.) Living in a remote South Dakota small town, my husband and I drove 200 miles to baptize and confirm our children in our "home" Episcopal parish.

Therefore, my announcement that I was studying Catholic doctrine was received with interest but not alarm. My husband thought this would be a subject that I would enjoy studying but didn't initially think that it would compel me onward to conversion. Initially, no one really worried that I would actually become

Catholic. But as time went on, he recognized that I was becoming more serious and I became worried as well.

What was I doing disrupting my family's faith? What would happen between my husband and I? Would this weaken my college-aged children's faith? Would anyone come into the church with me?

The Coming Home Network supported me with a dynamically wonderful apologist and mentor, Bob Geiger. He immediately began answering all the questions I could assemble. I received answers from him that reflected deep respect even when I had to delve deeper, when my questions challenged Catholic doctrine, and when I had to repeat my questions from a different angle. His patience was infinite. Scripture verses that were mysterious before became absolutely clear to me when viewed with Catholic doctrine. Here it all was, right out in the open.

As I studied each doctrine, a vision of the Sacred Circle kept coming before me. One-by-one, the teachings wove themselves together seamlessly creating a doctrine of wholeness. (The Sacred Circle is a sacred symbol in the Celtic and Lakota cultures. I related to this as I have been raised within a Celtic cultural family. I also am proud to have the heritage of the Ogallala Lakota and am an enrolled member.)

Within my initial email letters, I asked Bob, my CHN volunteer mentor, if according to the Catholic Church doctrine, whether or not the rest of my family would go to heaven if they were not Catholic. I did not warn him that his answer to this question would either drive me away or draw me closer to want to know more. It was a test question of great magnitude. His answer had a prophetic outcome. I was told by him that no one could dare to judge another person's heart. That was God's domain. I researched in the Catholic teachings, I found the same answer. The lack of condemnation was surprising to me. Bob continued to provide straight answers that were uncompromising regarding the tenets of the Catholic faith. I was struck with the encompassing depth of Catholicism. This Catholic faith, I was discovering, not only welcomed scientific reasoning; it was also impressive with its spirituality and love.

Meanwhile, I began attending the local Catholic Church trying to sit in the back pew and not be noticed. In as small of a town where I live that was an unrealistic expectation for sure! Father Bryan Sorensen would not allow that. He greeted me and welcomed me with warmth and love. I came to admire his leadership and service to the Parish. The first time I slipped into church, I sat stunned by the power of how he said Mass. The power of the

Eucharist was palpable and resonated within me. I wanted to come back again and again. The people of the parish were warm and welcoming. I knew that my worship and experience of God had found a home even if I could not have Communion.

Not being able to participate in the Eucharist was a deep sorrow that only those who have been kept away from Christ can know. I felt like I was in the desert on my personal Exodus from my past life, wandering in the Wilderness until I could find my way home. But Father Bryan's joy and laughter gave me encouragement. He too answered my questions and his teachings were admirable in their spiritual depth and knowledge.

Many months passed full of hard work, deep questions, and Bob's patience continued. He continued to walk patiently by my side in companionship. He revealed the depth of his knowledge and his faith with great humility when answering the multitude of diverse questions that I threw at him. As a mentor he gave me straight answers without equivocating and wisely allowed the promptings of the Holy Spirit to direct me in yielding to the gospel of truth.

Until one day, the circle became complete. It all became crystal clear in focus. I experienced the death of a dear patient for whom I had cared for years. I decided that day while driving 25 miles home from my clinic and hospital, that I could not live another day without becoming Catholic. I pondered about the truths in life. I knew that life is too precious and is far too short to not experience God completely. My heart cried out for more. I was Catholic in my heart. I wanted to be completely Catholic in my soul. I prayed deeply not knowing where this would take me.

I knew it could be very hard. I faced unknown consequences and I was breaking away from a family tradition of worship. But as Peter answered Jesus when He asked His Apostles if they were going to leave Him with the other disciples, I knew I must follow Jesus. As in Peter's plaintive statement of faith,

**“Master, to whom shall I go?
You have the words of eternal life.”**

I knew I had come full circle in my search. There was only one person and place that I could go~ that was Jesus Christ and His Church.

I arrived home and immediately called Father Bryan and asked him to help me come into the Catholic Church. He quickly came to my aid and through his leadership he brought me into the Holy Catholic Church with great ceremonial and traditional meaning. I was surprised by the joy expressed by him, the parish and my mentor, Bob Geiger. Their joy made mine complete.

To my delight, my clan all rallied around me with great support and much celebration for my choice. My husband fully supported me and my children also. I was changing the way we worshipped, breaking with family tradition, but they gave me their gift of acceptance. My aunt and uncle who are exemplary Catholics became my sponsors along with Bob Geiger.

The Lenten season remained my Exodus until Holy Week to bring me home into the Catholic Church on Easter 2006. My joy has not ceased. The depth and faithfulness of Christ's one Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church has given me all that my heart has yearned for in my life. My faith is like the Sacred Circle, a path woven together into unity, harmony and balance. I am most grateful.



But my story continues....

So now my heart felt closer to the heart of God. I felt I stepped into the ocean of God's love and my soul rested there for awhile. However, a stronger battle awaited me. My profession that I loved had now become a thorn. My profession became the battle ground.

I still prescribed contraceptives. This was the one teaching I did not resolve before coming into the Church. I thought to myself that I would find the answer or just let it go. I didn't have a plan. I just followed. Was some part of me hoping it wouldn't provoke my conscience? Probably. I didn't totally understand the rationale for it. I had plenty of rational reasons why contraception could and should be acceptable. My heart loved the Church for its clarity. My heart had trusted the Church for its truth. But did I really? My soul was divided and I knew it.

I wanted to enjoy my new found path. I wanted to just rest my head on the heart of God. But I was in conflict. I was back in the struggle about contraception and it would not let me go. I read Humane Vitae and admired the wise prophetic voice of the ramifications of contraception. I knew about Natural Family Planning years ago and found it a credible method. Yet, I had seen women struggle for respect and dignity. Equality was important to me. This was a means of ensuring this in my mind.

Selective learning was a part of the process rationalizing the use of contraception as a good. Oh sure, the birth control pill may allow conception but not implantation. But does one really believe that? I didn't. And as I went through my years of education I never

once heard it addressed. Not once. So my position seemed supported and this issue faded away from my consciousness. There were too many pressing issues in surviving the studying and clinical internships in school.

The only time I heard that oral contraception may be an abortifacient was during a symposium and the expert presenter, with anger driving his words, denounced that premise. I waited for this specialist to provide the scientific reasons in answer. But no further explanation came. It stood as an unsupported statement. My curiosity was stirred. It was there for a moment and was gone.

So I settled into my family practice that included women's health with the accompanying contraceptive expectations. Real answers are needed for real-life problems in the healing profession. Contraception seemed like a very good answer for people.

But now I was Catholic. And I became Catholic because I found Truth in the teachings and doctrines. I found an intrinsic consistency that was beautifully expressed in scripture and the life of Jesus Christ.

My path became tangled; it was no longer in balance. My harmony was lost. I wanted to rest but I couldn't ignore it. I would awaken with it on my mind. It followed me through my days. So with great rebellion, I wearily turned back to look at this issue of contraception. I entered the season of Lent and I was back in the desert wandering in the Wilderness again!

Bob Geiger stepped in once more to help me. Our discussions were strong, and emails flew fast and furious between us as I reflected and argued and tried to shake the Church's teachings. Father Bryan Sorensen encountered numerous discussions with me giving his time generously. I am sure I wore both of them out with my endless reflections on this subject. But they remained with me.

My struggles with this issue became centered upon three significant domains for consideration; the physiological, ethical and moral effects upon humankind.

Historically, strong proponents including Margaret Sanger promoted contraception because of racism, disrespect and disregard toward the poor and minorities in American society.

The history of oral contraception development in the 1950's was initially designed in studying men, as reported by Dr. Janet Smith in her well-received discourse in 1994 on *Contraception: Why Not?*. In Great Britain, during the investigations, one male subject was found to have a possible side effect that was not life-threatening. The study was immediately stopped because of the risks to the male research subjects. The research with women was not without danger. Three women died from adverse effects but the research for contraception continued. The obvious lack of equality in applying the ethical concerns of risks between the genders is documented.

The promise of contraception has proven fallacious and empty. Contraception has not dropped the divorce rate. It has not rendered abortions as rare. Unplanned pregnancies rise. Sexually transmitted diseases are not prevented. Contraception is more available now than ever before but women and children remain highly vulnerable to poverty and disease.

Breast cancer is now reported to have dropped significantly since the advent of restricted use of hormonal replacement therapy (HRT). Researchers propose that it is due to the drop in HRT use. These doses are much lower than what is found with oral contraception.

And then I found recent articles from the Mayo Clinic Proceedings, John Hopkins University researchers, the World Health Organization, and the New England Journal of Medicine discussing the significantly increased risk of breast cancer rates with the use of oral contraception.

I sat back and despite some unanswered questions, I had read enough. My misplaced advocacy was actually harmful to those I wanted to help. I came to the final conclusion that while there were no real easy answers to some situations, I could no longer prescribe contraception.

The words of Pope John Paul the Great in *Veritatis Splendor* ring even clearer to me.

But no darkness of error or of sin can totally take away from man the light of God the Creator. In the depths of his heart there always remains a yearning for absolute truth and a thirst to attain full knowledge of it. This is eloquently proved by man's tireless search for knowledge in all fields. It is proved even more by his search for the meaning of life. The development of science and technology, this splendid testimony of the human capacity for understanding and for perseverance, does not free humanity from the obligation to ask the ultimate religious questions.

Rather, it spurs us on to face the most painful and decisive of struggles,
those of the heart and of the moral conscience. Veritatis Splendor,
Ioannes Paulus PP. II ,1993 08 06

I have changed my practice. I feel like I am out of the
wilderness~ at least for now! The consequences still evolve from
my choice. But I am at peace and I love being Catholic!

Thank you for allowing me to tell the story of my journey.
It continues to be quite an adventure!

Robin Peterson-Lund

