
Evolution of Faith

Shari Merricle

Anyone who saw me as a child would have said I was a good Catholic, and I suppose I was. Baptized as a Catholic, I made my first Communion when I was in the second grade and made my Confirmation as a thirteen-year-old. For each sacrament that I made, I was greatly congratulated by my family members. To celebrate those sacraments, my parents held large parties, inviting friends, relatives – practically the whole neighborhood – and served shredded chicken sandwiches, chips, and white cake with vanilla frosting, my favorite! For each celebration, I received religious gifts such as a Bible, a rosary, and some statues of Joseph, Jesus, or Mary. I was a very active youth in my Catholic community. My cousin and I cleaned the windows, registers, and floors of the church every weekend until it would pass the white glove test. I attended religion classes regularly and went to Mass on every occasion necessary. My grandmother was very proud!

Since the Catholic Church owned our Elementary School, you can just imagine what it was like for those who weren't Catholic. We had religion classes before school every day and Mass every Friday. I had friends who were unpopular because they didn't go to religion or Mass with us. One of my friends in particular seemed very upset that he had to stay inside the gymnasium and wait for the rest of the kids to come back from religion class. However, he didn't realize how lucky he really was! Every Mass, the Priest would single out the kids to answer questions in church, and I never knew the answers. One day when I was a second-grader, Father called out my name to answer a question, despite my no-eye-contact trick. He made me so nervous that the following week I threw up during Mass, all over the floor! I like to call it the "Catholic Jitters." At least I didn't get singled out to answer any questions.

As years passed, I questioned many aspects of the Catholic religion. Why do we go to Mass so often? Why do we confess our sins to a Priest? More importantly, why can't my mom go to communion? I remember the day that I finally got the answer to that question. I asked my mom if she was baptized Catholic and she told me she was. Then I asked her, "Why don't you go to communion?" She softly informed me that the Catholic religion doesn't believe in divorce and the only way that she can take communion again is if she gets an annulment through the Catholic Church. I didn't really understand what an annulment was, but at least I got an answer to my question.

There was one vivid day that I realized how some Catholics act around those who come from a broken home. I was in complete shock when one of my friends came up to me during recess and told me she wasn't allowed to play with me. I was confused, torn, and my heart ached with pain, as I asked her why. She looked at me, solemnly and replied, "My parents don't want me to be in 'that' environment." What was she talking about? What exactly is "that" environment? My environment is no different than hers; her family is Catholic, just like mine, I thought. "The only difference is that I have two moms and two dads," I told her, as she walked away from me. To this day, I don't know if she told her parents what I said, but something magical happened and her parents accepted me.

As years went by, I grew closer and closer to my friend, and her family had shown me how to express my faith every day of my life. I grew to know her family very well. I went to her house after school one day, and her mother asked me to stay for dinner. I accepted the invitation and called my own mother to let her know. My friend and I made macaroni and cheese and hot-dogs. Everything about their dinner was so strange: the way they made their food, the way they

put sugar in their macaroni and cheese (why anyone would spoil such a delicacy is beyond me), but most of all, the way they prayed before dinner. I remember sitting down with a full plate and a glass of milk in my hand. No one else had sat down yet, but I was hungry; it was well-past supertime at my house. I reached for my fork and took a bite of that odd sugar-cheese mixture, when my friend told me to wait for grace. “Grace?” I thought, “Are you serious? Who says grace anyway?” I felt foolish and was reluctant to tell my friend that I didn’t know how to say grace, so I said nothing. The rest of the crew came into the dining room, sat at the table, bowed their heads, and said, “Bless this O’Lord for these gifts…” as I sat there, in silence. Thank goodness their eyes were closed, because my face was beat red.

As time ticked by, I learned more about what a true Catholic family should be like. My friend and her family had shown me how a Catholic should act. She talked me into going to church with her several times throughout our friendship, and she was always the first one to scold me for eating meat on Friday’s during lent. We met new people from other towns who also shared in our faith, and it seemed as if the Catholic faith was one of the greatest things that had happened to me.

As a freshman in High School, I began to feel accepted and knowledgeable in religion class. After being hounded by my friends, I finally made the decision to join the Catholic Youth Group called Hearthstone. We would have meetings that expressed our Catholic faith and our successes, and we would discuss upcoming events such as the next venue that Broken Yoke (a local Christian Rock Band) was playing and Hearthstone retreats. I met an enormous amount of people through this Youth Group, and all of my friends were a part of it.

I remember the time I was asked to help host a Junior High Hearthstone retreat; everyone thought I was the best Catholic present that day. Before the retreat had begun, I noticed a tiny, little thirteen-year-old girl hiding her face in the corner of the wall. I walked up to her and introduced myself. Then I asked her, “What’s your name?” She looked at me through her hands and said, “Jerika.” I could tell she was afraid of what the day had in store for her, but I reassured her that we were going to have fun. I reached out to her like no other chaperone would, and she clung to me like static. I chose her to be in my group and said that by the end of the day, I would have her dancing. I gained her trust slowly throughout the day and when it was time for the dance, Jerika did the chicken dance with me. I was so proud of myself for taking on a challenge and making her happy. We went to Mass and split to go our separate ways. We had a chaperone’s meeting after the retreat in which my name was mentioned.

Other chaperones at this retreat continuously commented on how good of a Catholic I was and how kind I was to reach out to someone in need, but I began to question myself. Sure, I may have been a good person for tending to this timid teenager, but I was not about to put myself up on a pedestal. I thought to myself long and hard. Anyone who has patience and a will can do what I did, and anyone in my situation may have done the same, not because it makes you a good Catholic, but because it makes you a good person. It makes you feel good about yourself, all soft and fuzzy inside, knowing that someone else benefited from your actions. If I were not Catholic, I would have reacted in the same way; it’s my personality. Therefore, it does not take a Catholic’s beliefs to do what I did.

The more I thought about this situation, the more I began to feel hypocritical. All of these people – my friends, Hearthstone leaders, and peers – all thought I was one of the best Catholics present that day. One leader even came up to me after the meeting and told me that she saw God through me. How frightening! I didn’t feel God’s presence. I simply chose to reach out to a little

girl that needed support. However, I said nothing, only smiled at my leader, and hugged her back as she hugged me.

Later that night, my conscience was at war with itself. Feelings of guilt and remorse flowed through my entire body as I realized I was doing this for the wrong reasons. I was not a true Catholic; I simply put on a front every time at church, with my friends, at school, and with the Youth Group. I wanted to keep them happy, so I kept my feelings sheltered from the world. Although, I knew it was wrong, very wrong.

The more negative things I learned about the Catholic religion, the more my thoughts wandered. I had seen the human nature of many people whose actions were unaffected by the true teachings and beliefs of the Catholic religion. More than once, I have seen two “perfect” Catholic church-goers lie to each other behind their backs. Another “perfect” Catholic had sex before marriage and ended up having a child out of wedlock. I know these things are looked down upon by the Catholic religion, but I thought to myself, “These people are still good people.” Then, I realized that many Catholics put on a front. I thought, “It does not make them better than me if they go to church and I do not, because in the end, we are all sinners.” Catholicism focuses so much on sins that everyone in the community hides them the best that they can.

It wasn’t until I was a junior in High School that I drew my final straw relative to the Catholic religion. I was at a Catholic Youth Conference in Bluffton, Ohio. I attended this event simply because my friends were going to be there. Basically, it was a weekend of fun, meeting new people, and working together to solve puzzles. We concluded the weekend with nothing other than a Sunday Mass, which I thought twice about skipping. I survived the entire Mass: the singing, taking the host and cheap wine at communion, and praying silently or less just thinking to myself, when suddenly, we had to go to confession! I had had enough!

At that point in the Youth Conference, I decided to stick up for my own beliefs. I took a stand: I refused to go to confession. My friends left our circle and spread out among the bleachers, while I sat silently on that gym floor, praying to God. When my best friend got back, she informed me that there was one Priest who didn’t have anyone waiting and she even tried to point him out to me. Mind you, this is the same friend whose family’s trust I had gained just a short while ago, but I didn’t care; I stood my ground! I told her that I wasn’t going to confession, I didn’t believe in confession by the Catholic means, and that I had already confessed my sins. She looked at me and said, “Well, it’s not that hard.” I looked back at her and said, “I know, but I’m still not going.” I looked away, closed my eyes, and continued my conversation with God, which took a turn to confessing this most recent incident, disappointing my friend about my decision to boycott the Catholic confession rituals.

Inside, a feeling of euphoria flowed through my body like anesthetics through my veins. I felt like a burden had been lifted from my shoulders, free to fly like a bird. I was excited and afraid, but ready to fight any other belief I had against Catholicism. The bull-headed horns that I had continued to grow, as I decided that I would stick up for and express my true beliefs. Eventually, I quit going to church altogether and I quit the Youth Group. I decided that Catholicism was not for me. There were too many questions and not enough answers.

I wandered through the rest of my high school years and also three years of college doubting the Catholic faith, but unsure of which path to follow. I seemed to carry on the conversation of religion with almost every person that I met, whether it was through school, work, or my friends. There are so many different faiths, and I was finally beginning to understand the world. Although I would disappoint many people if I came clean about my true feelings toward Catholicism, I

would rather rebel than conform to a religion with which I disagree.

I came to conclude that I was not a real Catholic; I wanted my faith to change and evolve. I wanted to explore the world of religion with arms wide open. I wanted to accept and be accepted anywhere for who I am, not what I believe. I knew Catholic religion was all wrong for me, but at that time I didn't know what religion was right. All religions stem from the same beliefs of a higher power. However, some (such as Catholicism) have gotten so picky and discrete between the lines of right and wrong. Leaders think their own religion is the only right religion. If every member thinks his or her religion is the only right religion, how will this lead to peace? Why should we dedicate our entire lives to one set religion? Why should we be dedicated to any religion at all?

It wasn't until May of 2006 that I found out, it's okay to step outside the comfortable nest of your religion and explore the world with your wings expanded. My boyfriend and I had planned a five-day trip to Seattle, Washington, as a graduation present for him. Our goal was to get away from our hometowns and see something we had never seen, do things we had never done, and go somewhere we had never been before. What I didn't know was that I would realize something about faith I had never realized.

It was my time to fly from the nest of Catholicism and fly free like a bird released into the wilderness. I felt like I had been caged up my entire life, caged into a Catholic point of view, but something happened in Seattle that set me free. On our second-last day in this mysterious but fascinating city, everything seemed to go wrong. Eventually, our day looked up as we ran into a young man about the age of 25. He had long, brown hair, an untrimmed beard, and eyes as blue as the sea. He was dressed in a blue and white plaid shirt, dark blue-jeans with a logo on the back that I couldn't make out, and a pair of brown Rockies. As we approached him, hand-in-hand, he asked us if we would like a free poem. I almost ignored him and kept walking, but his voice lured me in like a fish on a hook. He told us his name was Brett Dean McGibbon. We started talking to him and before too long, I felt like I really knew him. I thought, "Wow, he's really got it all figured out!" He had left his boring job in New York to travel across the country, writing poems and essays for a living. Here he was, self-promoting his books on the street corner of an Italian restaurant. At first, I was skeptical, but my boyfriend bought two of his books, "Fight, Flight, Surrender" and "Foreplay to Soul Come." The instant we got back to the hotel, the books were open in hand. We shared a few poems and short stories with each other about faith, love, and God. A few of them made us laugh, a few made us wonder, and a few made us cry. But more importantly, he expressed his view on religion and gave me the idea of the evolution of faith.

Brett explained that faith shouldn't matter, faith doesn't matter. As long as you respect others, you will be respected. He wasn't afraid to question his faith, but came to the realization that he needs God. In several un-named poems from his book, "Foreplay to Soul Come," Brett opens himself up to the world by saying, "I need to be strong in my love for god because god is all things- / I need to stand solo in my love for god / because god is the source of all things / is by loving all things / at once / as one / God" (96). He does this by expressing his love for Christ in everything. He sees Christ "everywhere, in the rain, in the Sun, / in the dusk, in the dawn, / and as the hearts and souls of those of us / wondering if we are" (71). Reading these quotes led me to realize that God is in all things. God is in the daybreak's sunrays that light up the sky, as the eagle's soar above the bright orange and pink clouds. God is in the bright, twinkling stars of night and in the moonlit path on the snow-covered ground. God is in the mountains, in the valleys, at the tree-tops, and in the wind. God is everywhere. God is in us.

Nonetheless, I thought, God is not only in the church, in our dreams, or in our prayers, he expresses himself through our actions. God was present with me when I tended to that shy thirteen-year-old. He was present when I went against the Catholic tradition and refused to go to confession. God was also present when I ran into Brett McGibbon. It was a time in my life that I was lost in my beliefs and God was there. God is in my every action, every waking hour, and I don't have to be a Catholic for him to support me. I simply must believe in him, as he believes in me to share my message: it's okay to allow your faith to change and evolve with your lives. So let go, set yourself free, God will still love you.