

Sometimes in life it can be easy to forget how much God is so in love with us, because we can just get a little bit lost.

These days, Yovonne Flores, who live in Tuscon, Arizona, finds an incredible peace when she goes to Mass.

She recalls one day, just finishing her confession and penance, waiting for Mass to begin. And a wonderful thought washed over her ind, like the sweet smell of orange blossoms in early spring; her heart full of love for God.

She was raised by a holy and Catholic mom, went to Catholic school for all but two years before college, and she says it would be nice to think that this was the foundation for a holy, saintly life. She had dreams of entering the convent, of serving God with her whole heart, but somehow along the way she got lost.

She says the saddest part of her life was when she was lost from God. She was hiding in the shadows, even though she knew God would always love and forgive her. She didn't go to Mass and forgot to pray because she was

too busy. God was no longer the first priority in her life anymore. She was truly lost; her life was like the rosary beads lost among the socks and old jewelry.

All her struggles and hardships were left for her to solve alone, and she was not happy. She was frightened, lonely, sad, and in in a loveless marriage of betrayal. Many times in the middle of the night, she would cry for the comfort of her God, but was not willing to return to the practices of her faith. She felt as if she did not belong.

She made many wrong choices during those difficult times. Church had become a foreign place and she had even forgotten the prayers said at Mass. She found herself wondering what she would say if she went to confession, "bless me Father it's been 17 years since.." She wondered how it had been that long.

It was the grace of God and the death of her saintly mother that brought her back home to begin rebuilding her relationship with God. Within one year she buried her mother, her husband of 17 years filed for divorce, and she

had breast cancer. She was at the bottom of a pit, frightened, alone, abandoned, rejected and feeling unloved.

Feeling unloved was the key that opened the door to her journey back to God. She had been taught that God would always love and forgive her, but would she be able to forgive herself, she wondered. Wanting to feel whole again she started to pray short prayers and listen to Christian music.

Through this, God reached into her soul. She knew that she would only be able to survive in this world if she would take the hand that God extended to her.

The following Sunday, she returned to Mass, but was not ready to receive Communion. She chose the evening candlelight Mass because the church would be dim and nobody would see her if she cried. During Mass, she felt God's presence, and poured her heart and tears out to Him. the music and light were soft and the priest, in his gentle and kind manner, reminded each of them to trust God and to love and serve Him in all things.

At each Mass she went to after that, she felt as if God had given the priest the exact words she needed to hear in her soul. For months she sat and

cried at every Mass she went to. She learned many tricks on how to hide her tears and wipe her nose so she would not draw any attention to herself.

Sometimes, when she tried to sing, the words were so profound that they would get stuck in her throat. She was probably the only one who left church with a cleaner face than when they came in. She would pack a quarter of a box of Kleenex in her pockets and off to church she'd go every Sunday evening.

Months passed and she was still a stranger in the church. She did not speak to anyone except when she had to give the sign of peace. She made sure she got there just before Mass started and stayed until all were gone so she could go to her car without being seen.

God's grace though kept her coming to Mass, and each Sunday she fell more in love; she could hear him whispering "Don't worry, all is well, I am with you." She finally found the courage to go to confession, and step into the light. Good things began to happen. She was more at peace at work. She prayed more; she talked to God; He was her constant companion.

She started to volunteer at Church, helping with little things, and began to give words of encouragement to others. Above all, she began to love again. She became a catechist teaching kids the faith.

And, this had an impact on her own grown children too. They started going to Mass with her, and she'd invite them over for a home made breakfast after Mass. She saved her money and took them to the KC pancake breakfast that was once a month. This in turn led to her grandkids enrolling in religious education classes, and during that space of time, she realized she was truly home and happy again.

One Sunday, as her four year old grandson was tugging at her to come into Mass, he said at the top of his lungs, "Hurry up Nana, it's party time." It lightened the parking lot mood for the 8:30 a.m. Mass, and she said there are precious memories, and perfect words out of the mouth of a child, for she says Mass is a celebration that you and I are invited to and we should all shout out, It's party time.

Indeed, it is, but I'd say more than anything, it is a celebration of love. Of God's love for us. Of how when we are lost, God reaches out to find us. Of

how we are fed. And also of how we are to feed one another. Such is the incredible love of our God.

In the first reading, we hear of Melchizedek; Abram has won a military victory, and offers a tenth of what he has taken as a gratitude to God. Melchizedek takes bread and wine to offer a sacrifice of thanksgiving. He's also a king, and he and other kings in the area are grateful to God and to Abraham for delivering them from the clutches of an oppressive king; the attacking king wanted to punish Melchizedek and others for seeking independence. With God's help, Abraham assembled a small force and pushed the attackers out, and recovered the land that was taken from them. Abraham dominates because he relied on God. On another level, I think of our souls as being attacked by the devil and sin. And when we rely on God, we are able to reclaim what is lost. This is why we call Mass a sacrifice; it re-presents what happened at the Last Supper and on Good Friday. The Israelites would also offer animal sacrifice in the Temple; the animal would be offered as a giving back to God of His creation, and what happened to the animal should have happened to the one offering the sacrifice, meaning the person was aware of their sinfulness, and wanted to make amends. Hence we refer to Jesus as the sacrificial lamb, and you

see the lamb even on our stained glass window of the Nativity. Sometimes we don't like to think about the sin part, and think that as Christians we should just focus on the doing part, the social justice, the feeding of people - and this is important (in more ways than one, more on that in a moment) but the starting point is to remember that the Devil is working hard to corrupt people and to convince people that sin isn't a big deal. It subtly creeps in and takes over like a cancer. And this is why at Mass, the Eucharist is there to help remove sin, and to bring us closer to God, and to open our eyes to the reality of sin. We express our sorrow for sin before we receive Communion, and then join our sinful souls to the sacrifice of Christ who loves us and wants us not to be ashamed, but loved. And this love is given to all of us. Yvonne didn't have to hide in the shadows or be ashamed; as she said, she realized Jesus was saying He loves her and He is here for her and all will be OK. This is why Jesus gives us his Body. We are told by Paul in the second reading to, as Jesus told us, "do this in remembrance of me" when we take the bread and the wine. This is again a re-affirmation of God's love and brings to mind the old covenant, when the Israelites and their sacrificial were sprinkled with blood, symbolizing how God was saying my life blood belongs to you and the people saying the same. But even though the people would fall away, God remained faithful.

And Jesus is the answer. The Eucharist, the Chalice are that New Covenant. We partake in that new and everlasting covenant, and are conformed onto Christ. This is why it's so important to be at Mass and why two years ago the bishops fought to make sure Churches would not stay closed. We are not at Mass to be entertained, or to just listen to music. We are here to meditate on the Word of God, but to receive Jesus in the Eucharist so we can grow closer to Him; so we can be comforted. At Mass as I said we are winners and saints. We come from all walks of life. Perhaps like Yvonne, there are things you've buried or try to forget; maybe you sometimes think of mistakes you've made. Or maybe you're going through challenges in life. This is where Jesus meets you and me at the altar; to comfort us; to take away our sins; to give us strength for the journey ahead. Never doubt God's love for you, knowing you are always welcome at this altar.

But with that, a challenge. Note in the Gospel the people are hungry, and Jesus takes the food and the people are fed. Jesus says the blessing, and gives the food to the disciples to feed the hungry people. Yvonne took what she received, and she did not keep it hidden; her love for God inspired her kids to come back to Mass; it gave her grandson a joy for Mass; it helped

her to find her gifts and share them with others as she taught the faith to kids. You and I can do so much to feed others through our words and actions when the Eucharist transforms us. Think for instance of the sacrifice of fathers; as we honor our dads this weekend, I think of my dad as an incredibly loving, hard working man. He worked hard in maintenance for schools, keeping things running and clean for everyone. He was always there for me growing up, and patient with me and spent a lot of time with me. He'd give so much of his time to help his own parents and in-laws. To this day he's active at the parish I grew up at as a lector, and does a whole lot out of love for his grandson. In him I see the faith in action. So how do we feed others through making those same choices to sacrifice for others, to give of our time? In our actions, we can do so much to reveal the love of God. But this is true for words as well. How I came to know the faith was through the guidance of my parents, through studying it, and discerning right from wrong. I needed others to help show me the way though and still do. Our world more than ever needs you and me to shepherd others. Just this past week, there was a story on the Today show of 8 dads who were, I kid you not, grateful for how at earlier points in their lives, a pregnancy was ended and they think they are better for it. In some cases the couple did not want a third child; in another they felt it was too soon. There was no

remorse at all; rather a celebration of death. The story was one of the most chilling I'd ever read and it was as if you were watching a Nazi speak about who lives and who dies in a war movie. Yet this folks is the state of our world; the Devil is working overtime. The Devil is trying to get people away from God and the truth. And the truth is God loves us, but we fall away because we do not know the truth. And this is where we live out the Eucharist. Like Yvonne, encouraging people to come back to Mass. Like her speaking of the faith and what it means to kids. And also having those difficult conversations with people like those who would see nothing wrong with ending the life of an unborn child, or redefining the family or personhood, or treating someone different because of their race. To so many, the truth is obscured. And this is why for us, Mass again isn't just entertainment - it's to change us, to make us more like Christ, so we become what we receive, So we can go forth and announce the Gospel of the Lord. Something that is never easy, but something we can do with the grace of God. People need to be fed with actions of love and mercy, but also with the truth.

Momentarily we will again say those familiar words "Lord I am not worthy to have you enter under my roof but only say the word and my soul shall be

healed.” We never have to hang our heads in shame, for God’s love for us is beyond anything we can imagine. So invite Him into your heart, and turn everything over to Him. But also remember the challenge after we are fed - as the Father has sent me, so I send you. May we be filled with that love, but also go forth to feed a hungry world.