

Years ago, Kathy French, who is now an active Catholic, found herself like so many of us hungry for the truth, and most importantly a meaningful relationship with God which had been clouded by a bad image of God that had been painted for her by the people around her.

She was born in a rural community outside of Cleveland, Tennessee. This small town is tucked in the southeast corner of the state, right in the heart of the Bible Belt. Throughout the region, many different fundamentalist faiths are practiced and there are very few Catholic communities.

Her family belonged to the Church of Christ, which is quite different from other faiths because of several strict beliefs and practices that are unique to them. As she was growing up, she began to question these beliefs, and these questions ultimately led her to search for and find our Lord and Savior in the Catholic Church.

The church she was raised in preached hell, fire and brimstone and that God is to be feared. They learned that He is not a loving God unless you give up everything and follow Him as the apostles did. The Church of Christ, she notes, is extremely strict - teaching that the Bible is to be taken

literally - a belief that was firmly instilled in her throughout her childhood. She was taught Scripture and had it memorized before she could even read. Once she learned to read, she read the Bible from cover to cover several times. Memorization though didn't make her a scholar though.

Life in the Church of Christ was intense and the rules were unbendable. For example, instrumental music is not played in the Church of Christ because it's considered a sin, so songs are sung without musical accompaniment. The bread and grape juice served during the celebration of the Lord's Supper every Sunday is a memorial of Christ's passion and not the actual presence of Christ's body and blood. Consumption of alcohol is considered a sin, even though Christ used wine on several occasions (including making more wine being His first miracle!).

Playing card games is sinful, even if it is an innocent child's game. Wearing make up, going to movies, and dancing are also forbidden in the Church of Christ because it is believed that these activities will create lustful thoughts and lead to gambling and other sins that are unforgivable.

According to the Church of Christ, the Catholic Church is the scourge of the planet and many things they learned were of an anti-Catholic sentiment. These teaching greatly disturbed her growing up; she says she had her face smacked for even asking why, as true Christians, we would hate people of other faiths. In essence, she was in a cult.

She was taught that no one should be called “father” because that title is reserved for God alone, and was told that Catholics worship statues and Mary, and not Jesus and God. She was taught the Catholic Church does not teach from Scripture, but from a different book, which she now realizes is the Catechism of the Catholic Church. Also reciting written prayers is considered a sin that Catholics often commit.

Baptism is another area where the Church of Christ differs from the Catholic Church. She learned that Catholics sprinkle babies, a type of baptism that is not valid because the word baptism means immersion or submersion, and unless you are completely submersed, your baptism is not legitimate. Also, since a baby cannot possibly understand what is going on, and since they are not at the age of reasoning or accountability, infant baptisms were not considered valid. Needless to say, it was tough for her

to gather the courage to look away from the false shepherds who were in her life.

As she grew older, she found herself not happy or satisfied with her faith. For many years she struggled daily with a great emptiness in her heart and soul. She felt guilty and lost. Finally she decided as she was lost, she'd engage in worldly things to try to be filled; drinking, dancing, going to movies. This led to more guilt. She'd pray to God and was angry with Him for the guilt she felt. When she was young, she was taught to have faith and never to question God. It wasn't until later in life she understood that she wasn't questioning God; rather she was questioning the false view of God that had been given to her as a child.

She began to realize that many of the things she learned in the Church of Christ weren't exactly what Scripture taught, and started to question those beliefs. At the time she was afraid of what her family would do if she ventured outside of the faith, so she prayed with all her heart for the courage to explore other faith traditions. Something was missing in every faith she tried, until she stumbled into a relationship with a cradle Catholic who she would eventually marry.

Her husband, Craig, and Kathy met while both stationed in the military in Germany. At that time, he only went to Mass on holy days of obligation. She asked him why he bothered going to church at all if he was only going on feast days a few times a year, and a short time later he began attending Mass more often.

When Kathy returned to the United States, Craig came to Colorado where Kathy was stationed. He immediately found a Catholic church and started going to Mass regularly. Each time he went, he came home from church very excited and on fire for his faith. After watching him return home from church several times filled with incredible joy and peace, Kathy asked if she could go to Mass with him. He reminded her of how her family felt about the Catholic Church and she told him that they were hundreds of miles away and she did not have to tell them, at least not yet.

Craig told her a few things about what to expect before she went to her first Mass, but there was not enough time for her to understand everything. Mass began and so did the genuflecting, standing, kneeling and reciting of written prayers. She was overwhelmed. Then came the beginning of the

consecration. The priest held up the Host and recited the words of Our Lord and Savior: "This is my body, which was given up for you, do this in remembrance of me." Then he took the cup and raised it up and said, "This is the cup of my blood. It was shed for all, do this in remembrance of me."

Kathy began to cry and had to leave Mass so she wouldn't distract anyone. Outside she prayed and asked God why she was crying. The next week she went back to Mass, and then the week after that, she was able to control her crying but the tears continued to quietly flow, and she longed to be in communion with her Lord and Savior. She wanted to healing power of His body and blood, and had never desired anything so much in her life. At each Mass, she prayed the blessing quietly to herself as the priest said it aloud. She finally knew this was what she had been searching for for all those years.

She kept praying because she knew she would be leaving more than her childhood religion if she joined the Catholic Church. She talked with a few family members, giving them a scenario of a friend of hers joining the Catholic Church, and their angry reaction made it clear to her that she had a difficult choice to make, God knew, she says, that she was struggling with

this decision, and He soon allowed her to experience His healing power through her prayers before the Blessed Sacrament.

When their oldest son Justin was only 6 months old, he contracted spinal meningitis, and by the time they realized how sick he was, it was almost too late to save him. The doctors gave him a 10% chance of surviving through the night. They asked Kathy if she understood what they were telling her, and she said yes, that they were telling her her son was more than likely going to die.

She told her husband that she needed to go to the church to pray. When they arrived, Kathy knelt before the Blessed Sacrament and prayed with her whole heart. Instead of praying for a miracle, she prayed before her Lord as Jesus had in the Garden of Gethsemane over 2000 years ago. She asked that His will be done with Justin, and that if He was to take her son, to give her the strength to accept and understand his death. She also promised that if Justin did live, she would raise him up to give him back to God, and that she would no longer hesitate in her conversion to Catholicism. Suddenly she understood that what she was about to lose

here on earth was nothing compared to what she was going to gain in heaven someday.

That night in the hospital was touch and go. When the doctor came in the next morning, he said Justin was alive not by anything he or his staff had done, but by the power of God. Kathy knew exactly what he was talking about. She went back on her knees before the Blessed Sacrament in praise and thanks. Today her son is in his 20s and has no health problems.

After that, she began her official journey into the Catholic Church. For a couple of years, she attended RCIA, went to all of the Bible study and Church doctrine classes she could, and continuously learned about Catholicism. She spent time before the Blessed Sacrament asking for guidance, and each time she prayed, she felt His presence, love and compassion.

The transition was not easy because she struggled with what was to happen with her relationships with family members. She knew she had to put her faith in God, just as her family had taught her to do when she was a child. She prayed for the strength she would need when she told her family



of her conversion, and asked Him to ease the pain they would have because of her decision to become a Catholic.

On Holy Saturday, 1991, the sun was shining bright, the birds were singing, and spring was in full bloom. A new beginning was taking place all over the earth, and a new life in Christ was about to begin for Kathy as well. Tears of joy and happiness streamed down her face as, for the first time, the priest held up the Host and then the chalice and said to her, "The body of Christ," and "The blood of Christ." She responded with a very profound, "Amen." At last, she says her Lord and Savior was feeding her with the eternal food of His glory.

She says in no way does she deserve the gift of the Eucharist. It is only through His grace, mercy and suffering on the cross that she humbly approaches the altar to receive Communion as His beckoning. She realizes that this was the blessing she had hungered and thirsted for all those years. She now wants everyone to know what the Eucharist truly is and what it can do for each and every one of us.

Now she can't wait to go to Mass each week because the Eucharist is what sustains her. When she is in adoration of her Lord, Kathy writes she often remembers the days of her searching, longing and emptiness. She never wants to forget how important it is for her to come to Christ in the Eucharist, to be fed and have her thirst quenched on earth until she goes home to be with Jesus for eternity.

When she converted to Catholicism, some friends and family members did disown her. A few reluctantly apologized, and many still couldn't find it in their hearts to forgive her for leaving their faith. They do not understand why she became Catholic even though she tried to explain her decision. They told her she was going to hell for leaving the only true church. She told them that our Lord and Savior died on the cross for all of us, and suggested they need to read and study to learn the real truth about His Church.

She prays for her family and friends in the Church of Christ daily, and feels no resentment towards them. They are living by what they were taught she says just as she did once, and she only feels love and compassion towards them.

She thanks God for leading her to His Son's sacrifice, His broken Body and precious Blood that was poured out and now fills her completely. She prays a prayer of thanksgiving each time she has the humble honor and privilege of coming to His table to receive Holy Communion.

Like Kathy, all of us are seekers. Moses in our first reading reminds us of the 40 years in the desert; how the people were wondering, free from Egypt, but still falling often back into sin. But through this time, the Lord fed the people with manna and gave them water from the rock. He came to be their shepherd and to guide the people forward. And this weekend, we celebrate in a special way how the Lord Jesus does that through the Eucharist. As we celebrate this feast, it's worth thinking about our own journey, and reminding ourselves how much we are loved by our Lord and what following Him means.

With respect to the journey, the first question to ask is where are we on our journey? And once we answer that, we then ask what image do we have of God? Sometimes the journey is easy, sometimes not so much. Life can be very difficult. People let us down. We let ourselves down. And sometimes

as with Kathy's childhood, a person can have a bad portrait of who God is; the tyrant; the harsh judge who is out to get you; someone who remembers every sin. But then we listen to the words from John's Gospel: I am the living bread that came down from heaven; whoever eats this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give is my flesh for the life of the world." It calls to mind the multiplication of the loaves and fishes, when Jesus looks at the crowd and has pity on them because He loves them; and has the people sit and then multiplies the loaves and fishes to feed the people. God isn't sending some representative to us, but God Himself comes to us because His love for us is so deep. He knows what it is like to be betrayed, to suffer physically and mentally, to suffer anguish. So the starting point is to remember that God loves us; that we can come as we are. That God sees to the heart and knows that we are hungry, and wants to feed us. On our own, we'll never be satisfied, but with God feeding us, we are filled. We needn't compare ourselves to others, or think "I have to do this to be loved by God," but simply come as we are and come to realize what Kathy did: that God loves us all.

We then can think about how we are fed. Jesus teaches the crowds before they are fed in that miracle. In the Gospel, Jesus explains that unless you

eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood you do not have life within you, and that his flesh is true food and his blood, true drink. Kathy read these words as a child; she memorized Scripture but didn't understand it. And this is why she became a seeker; through prayer; than through study. For us, it's important to also understand who it is we worship. What does it really mean to be a Christian? Anyone can memorize Scripture or prayers. That's a good thing to do. But why do we do what we do? Who is Jesus really? Jesus created one Church, not many. And He gave this Church the gift of the Eucharist and the Holy Spirit to guide Her and us. This is why Mass matters; it's what we do in the first part of the Mass before we are fed; we think about God's love for us. We listen to the words of Scripture. We are taught. And it's something we hopefully do on our own time too through ongoing faith formation and prayer, and knowing that on our own, we will never be fully fed which is why Mass matters so much.

And lastly, we feed a hungry world. There are only a few morsels of bread and a few fish in that well known story, but that symbolizes how we bring what we have to God and God will do great things for us. Kathy raised a son, has a good marriage, and now tries to help others see the truth more

deeply. Think of Mother Teresa on a train car discerning Jesus calling her to help the poor, with no institutional support or money; or Martin de Pores, the Peruvian saint who wasn't even accepted at first due to mixed race, sweeping floors and cleaning linen at a monastery in Lima; or John Vianney, sent to a small rural area because he was seen as not all that scholarly, revitalizing that town and helping to re-evangelize Europe as people came from all over to go to confession and talk to him. This is you and me; on our own, we can't do it, but when we link what we have to God, just like the apostles who go and bring the people the food, we can feed one another. The key is remembering God has great things in store for us if only we'd listen to Him.

Life indeed isn't easy; and if we try to feed ourselves with money, power, escapism through our hobbies, we'll find we'll never be full. We can do much on our own, but inevitably others beat us down, we get down on ourselves, we go through the valleys. But through it all, Jesus is with us to feed us and loves us more than we can imagine. So let us never forget that love, and seek Him out, being fed by Him so we can feed a hungry world.