

I was 25 years old when my parents stopped attending Mass. It was a Saturday afternoon in March and I was about 2 minutes away from walking out the door to catch the 4:30PM service. As I pulled my jacket on, I looked at my Mom and asked if they were ready to go. She simply replied that they weren't going. I just looked at her for a hard 30 seconds, as a lump started to form in the back of my throat. No other words or explanation followed. Trying to hide the sudden sting I felt in my heart I quickly walked out the door.

It wasn't until the following week, when I got the same response, that it really started to sink in what was happening. It took awhile for me to process the situation, but after several weeks the initial shock wore off and I finally accepted the fact that my parents were no longer practicing Catholics. I was overcome with emotion, and a feeling of betrayal took up residence in my heart for well over a year. I found myself feeling angry and abandoned, and I started to question many things. How could my own parents, who swore at my Baptism to always support me and guide me on my faith journey, just decide that they no longer wanted to do that? Does that mean my Baptism didn't actually mean anything to them? Was it all just a lie? Should I stop going to Mass too? Why do I still go to church?

I felt like my life was spiraling out of control as question after question kept arising. And it's sad to admit but I truly didn't have an answer for why I still attended Mass, other than the mere fact that I was Catholic and it's what we do. But honestly what was the big deal if I didn't go? Why was it so important? Couldn't I just talk to God and live my faith at home the way it appeared that most of society did? I had so many questions, and felt completely lost with no idea who to talk to or where to go for help with all my uncertainty and confusion. The reality of it was that I already had one foot out the door and was only a few steps away from just walking away from my faith. But by the grace of God I didn't and I continued to attend Mass into the summer.

Then one day in August I saw an ad in the bulletin about the RCIA class that would be starting in a few weeks. It mentioned that anyone could join, even fully initiated Catholics who just wanted to learn more about their faith. Not having much knowledge about what RCIA really was I was feeling so desperate for answers and direction that I reached out to Deacon Garrow. This turned out to be one of the biggest turning points of my life; the moment when my life would turn down a specific path and change drastically. The point when the Lord just grabbed a hold of my heart and didn't let go.

I met with the Deacon a few days prior to the first class as he wanted to know where I was on my faith journey. I discussed my state of confusion and the hurt that I felt. I don't actually remember much else about that conversation, but I did show up to the first class. And if I'm being honest, seriously questioned if I was going to go back the following week. It was a very uncomfortable evening for me as I sat and listened to some of the other participants speak. There was so much I didn't know; I was very

intimidated and really didn't know if RCIA was the right decision for me or not. But the following week I did return, as well as every week after for the entire year. By the end of that class in May my heart was on fire for the Lord. Growing up a cradle Catholic I was absolutely shocked at how much I didn't know or understand about my own faith or the Mass. That first year just blew my mind with all the information I learned. My only problem now was trying to figure out how I was going to remember everything. Before that last class ended I already made the decision that I would need to come back the following year and do it all over again so I could make sure I really understood and retained everything there was to know about the faith.

Well fast forward to Summer of 2020; I just finished my 7th year of RCIA, and guess what...I still don't know everything about my faith! I continue to learn year after year as the conversations change and vary among the different participants that come through the program. The Holy Spirit guides us in all different directions, and so no two classes have ever been the same. Since that very first year I have grown immensely in my spiritual and personal life. I have participated in a variety of Catholic conferences and retreats, went on a pilgrimage to Fatima, helped start a Catholic women's book group, became a Eucharistic Minister, went on a Catholic cruise with a bunch of strangers, and for the first time in my life developed a close personal relationship with Jesus Christ. None of this would have happened had I not joined RCIA and really learned about the Catholic faith. And even now, after all these years, my heart continues to burn and hunger for the Lord.

I honestly think RCIA is a class that every single Catholic adult needs to take, because just as I was born and raised Catholic my entire life, I can guarantee that every single one of us has more to learn. And maybe if more of us actually understood our faith and the Mass at a deeper level and *really* believed what was taking place at the Altar, our churches would be filled and we wouldn't lose so many Catholics due to a stagnant spiritual life. And I truly believe that once we understand our faith on a deeper level it's the ONLY way we are going to be able to bring others in or back to the Catholic faith.

Our purpose on this Earth is to save souls. Each of us, no matter what our vocation, is called to live a life of holiness and bring souls to Heaven. The best way to do this is to live our lives by example. To let others see Jesus through us so that their hearts are stirred and start to burn with a desire to know Him more. For me RCIA was the first step to really owning my relationship with God and living my life for Christ. While I fervently hope and pray that someday my parents will return and get to know Jesus the way I do, I will also be forever thankful that the Lord used that experience to grab a hold of my heart and gifted me with a greater understanding of His love, grace, and mercy.

*"For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future." ~Jeremiah 29:11*