

Lifting the Veil
by Melissa Vallejo, 2013

The predominant question that people ask me upon discovering my joining the church is, "Why do you want to be Catholic?" There is no long or short of it. It was genuinely a natural progression. I equate it to being shown a brilliant diamond for the first time. Its luster and clarity are entrancing. They entice you to seek more diamonds, but eventually, simply possessing multiple diamonds is not enough. You seek the source, and when you find it, it's not what you imagined. The source of a diamond in its true form is dark coal. It is more organic than the superficial stone. You are touching the earth. When one probes into the history of the Church, they are led to its Catholic roots. It is organic and earthy. Just like Jesus. This is about how I lifted the veil to see the true Church. This is how I drink from the source of God's truth and not a tributary or watered down version. This is not insipid water. This is straight from the well of Jacob. I do not purport to understand all the mysteries of the Church, but I choose to accept them in the name of Jesus Christ.



I believe most people do not question their religion beyond that into which they were born. They just accept it without inquiring why they are Catholic or Methodist or Jewish or Hindu. It just becomes rote and a fulfilled expectation, but if one were to sit and truly explore the depths of their heart and study the history of their religion, would they still choose it? Would the adopted Chinese baby choose Judaism if not for its adoptive Jewish parents? Would the cradle Catholic still attend mass every Sunday? As Christians our greatest commandment is to love the Lord our God with all of our heart and all of our soul and all of our mind (Matthew 22:37). In your current form of worship are you fulfilling this commission? Why are you Catholic or Non-denominational or whatever you are? Is it congenital or was it your choosing or both?

Catholicism asks something of us. Not just to attend church and attempt to encounter Christ through feeling or on an emotive route through charismatic music or raucous preaching. It is beyond feeling. It is not - what can I get out of church today? It is - what can I do to serve God today? I have known many people that have left the church with the reason of: I just didn't feel anything when I went. That is tantamount to saying: I'm not in love with my spouse anymore, so I'm going to seek a new one. The old I just don't feel it at church, let me go seek another one excuse is not feasible. You are still committed to God. You are still devoted to His church, just as one should be dedicated to their marriage despite the current feeling or lack thereof. To utilize the old adage love is a choice not a feeling, I choose to love God in the church He established.

I grew up with a Protestant background, from rip-roaring Pentecostal fare to fire and brimstone Baptists to the Non-denominational open and airy vibe. I did it all, but I always felt a longing as if there had to be something more. I encountered Catholicism various times in my thirty-three years. The first instance was at my cousin's first communion. Although the service was foreign, I knew I wanted to be a part of it. There was something old and mystical and right that I witnessed. In high school I had the opportunity to travel to Ireland and visit an abbey, where I experienced a mass with

genuine monks and incense and austerity. The worship was astounding. In college I would attend mass with friends and was taken with the feeling of community. During the Prayers of the Faithful I felt the power of the congregation collectively answering "Lord, hear our prayer." Just as explained in 1 Corinthians 12:12, it was the body of Christ coming together for one purpose.

Yet none of these happenstances were enough. They piqued my interest and roused my curiosity, but I still felt the need to follow in my family's traditions. After all, as humans we are creatures of habit and pattern. My father's death brought me closer to God, yet I still felt adrift. Then I married a cradle Catholic who could not answer my nagging questions regarding his faith, but exhibited such balance and peace and resolution, that I would look at my husband and think, "I want that." So finally after fertility issues and baptizing two beautiful babies Catholic, I came to St Laurence. In hindsight, these moments that were life changing were all because I had to give up my concept of control. I could not command the outcome. It was up to God. It was in that surrender that I found not only Him but His church. It was in that submission that I joined St Laurence. I had tried RCIA at other churches but something was not genuine about them. At St. Laurence I encountered Christ loving leaders, but they were not haughty or self righteous - just loving and patient. Thus it began. The veil slowly lifted. The questions eventually answered. I studied Church history and learned of the richness of our past. I examined Mary and Jesus and the apostles and how their call is also mine. I was surrounded by a loving team of leaders to direct me along the way. Yet my journey has just begun. Which gifts has God bestowed upon me to help others? How can I be a light unto this world for Christ?

Both Catholics and Protestants seem to argue about the other's literal interpretation of the Bible, yet Catholics truly believe in communion and that one is ingesting the true body and blood of Christ. It changes – transubstantiates if you will. I used to contend that this was Catholic fundamentalism, until February 9, 2013 when I participated in Adoration. Our involvement was part of the Heart of Worship retreat that we had to attend as a requirement of RCIA. Father Drew begged us not to leave early, but to stay the whole day until the conclusion at which time Adoration would take place. I was told that most Catholics have not participated in Adoration. My Catholic role model, my husband, had not, so I was a bit skeptical.

After the mass, Father Drew changed vestments. He adorned himself in all white and processed in towards the monstrance – a beautiful gold cross that resembled a sunburst, which inside held the body of Christ. He bowed before it and prayed, "Holy Spirit, come down. Holy Spirit, come down. Holy Spirit, come down." He repeated this over and over again. The church fell absolutely silent. It was as if time stood still. Then the choir began to slowly sing. I was not familiar with the song; therefore, I did not know the words. Father Drew and the other priests held the monstrance and walked down every aisle of the church. As he passed carrying the cross and the body of Christ, people held out their hands in reverence, tears abounded, heads bowed. Before it got to the section my husband and I were in, the Holy Spirit came down, and I fell to my knees. I could no longer hold up my head. The Holy Spirit was upon me. My tears flowed. I was in the presence of God. When the monstrance came by I suddenly knew the words:

Set a fire down in my soul
That I can't contain and I can't control
I want more of you God, I want more of you God.

I outstretched my hand and watched as people scrambled to touch Him. When it passed us you felt it - the presence of Christ. The intangible felt tangible. My husband next to me knelt the whole time - almost two hours - with his head bowed and his hand outstretched. I knew the Holy Spirit touched him, and yet in that moment he rubbed my back as my tears surged and was still ever protective and caring for me, his wife. That is love. He later shared with me that he was unaware of how he knelt that long. He just thought of all the people in other countries, who are persecuted for their faith, and here we are free to follow Jesus – the least we can do is bow and kneel.

In this moment I was transported back to the death of my father, and I recalled the Mercy Me song my uncle sang at his funeral. So in answer to Mercy Me's question in the contemporary Christian song "I Can Only Imagine":

Surrounded by Your glory, what will my heart feel
Will I dance for You Jesus, or in awe of You be still
Will I stand in Your presence, or to my knees will I fall
Will I sing hallelujah, will I be able to speak at all
I can only imagine

The answer is yes. I stood before Jesus. In awe of Him I was still. I fell to my knees singing and praising. Then when he was before me, I could not speak. He is greater than I. All I can do is thank Him. Thank you Father for loving me unconditionally. Thank you Jesus - for there but for the grace of God go I. Thank you Holy Spirit for guiding me – little ole me – to the truth of the church You established. Thank You Jesus for leading me to drink from the waters of the fountain You formed, not a diluted version. I drink from the source, from You Father.

I fought this. I resisted it. I did not want to deny loyalty to my father. I did not want to deny the tradition of my family, but at the end of the day, I only have to answer to God. I have to be pleasing to my celestial Father, and for that I know my earthly Father would be proud. I've learned to stop living in legalistic fear and live in the freedom of the Holy Spirit. I've discovered how to put God before all things - to seek Him first and foremost and all of the silly little things that consume my mind with worry just melt away and fall into place – as He deems it.

After my various encounters with the Church, after my wonderful marriage to a cradle Catholic, after the miraculous births of my two Beauties, did I lift the veil. I am now able to see with bright eyes the truth of the church God established, and I am grateful to be a part of it. To this I lift the veil of ignorance and inauthenticity, so that I may love our Lord in all His glory and worship him in His almighty love and power in the church He first established here on earth.