

# CATHOLIC BY CHOICE

Why I embraced the faith,  
joined the Church, and  
embarked on the adventure  
of a lifetime

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# Introduction

Let me tell you a story about Eddie. We met in a recovery program years ago, and he would tell this story about himself. Once when he was trying to stop drinking, he found himself in a psychiatric hospital. He was broke. He'd lost his job. His wife had left him. He was at the end of his last rope. Every morning, he would talk to a psychiatrist. After several sessions the doctor said, "Eddie, you're all over the map. You need to focus. I want you to go off by yourself and think about this question: What are the three things you need in order to live? The three things you absolutely have to have to keep living."

Eddie said okay, and he went off to think. A few days later, he came back with his answer.

"First of all," Eddie said, "I need to breathe." (He was taking the question seriously. He had no choice at that point.) "Second, I need to drink water. I know I can go without food for weeks. I've done it. But I need water all the time."

"Last," he said, "I need to be understood. If nobody understands me, I think I'll die."

I don't believe Eddie was being melodramatic about dying. He'd gone through too much for that. I think he was just being realistic. If we're not understood, we can die—fast or slow. It's a form of loneliness, and people all over the world die from loneliness every day. If

we're not understood, we might feel simply frustrated at first, but if it continues, this frustration can rise into an ocean of despair, pain, even panic. You see this need to communicate in toddlers before they learn to talk, a compulsion that can't be explained as mere convenience. You see it in the aged and the sick. If we're not understood in some way that we truly need, it can make us older, make us ill. Our libraries are monuments of trying to be understood, with each book representing success in various degrees. This book, too, of course.



*Catholic by Choice* is a love story about conversion and the honeymoon of faith. It began when I visited a Benedictine monastery. I was there for only three days, to read for a while and relax. I didn't see visions or hear voices. But when I came back, I found myself on a path. I felt an invisible hand in the small of my back, gently pushing me forward. Something—I didn't know what—had happened.

What happened, in fact, was an intense, painful, and utterly dazzling two-year period during which I fell in love with God, became a Christian, and finally entered the Catholic Church. Much of the book was written a year after I joined the church, when the experience was still fresh in my mind. That was almost fifteen years ago, however, so it's natural, even appropriate, to politely ask at this point if I'm still a practicing, fully functioning Catholic. That glorious, utterly dazzling conversion that I talk so much about—did it stick?

Yes, actually, I believe it did.

After all these years, I still have my Mass “cavity,” a feeling of emptiness in the center of my chest, just under the sternum, that gradually builds every week and can be filled only by going to Mass. Nothing else can fill that emptiness.

“But what about your faith?” a reader might ask. “Have you ever been faced with doubts? A dark night of the soul? And how’s your family? Are the kids all right? Are you still married? Still employed? Still sober? Have you ever regretted joining the church?”

These are good questions. The Mass is the “source and summit of our Christian life,” but a Catholic life is always more than showing up in the pews. Life keeps happening. We come down from the pink cloud, the honeymoon is over, and then the relatives arrive, hungry, unannounced, and asking questions at the door.

So the biggest question might be this: After recovering from the flash and enthusiasm of a manic episode that lasted literally for years, have I reached a more authentic conversion that moves beyond a peak experience to a more-balanced faith?

Probably not. I am a serial enthusiast. I keep losing my balance and falling in love, and my new life—yes, it still feels new—is very much a work in progress. But God gave me faith years ago, and he keeps giving me faith. Certainly, I have days when I forget, when I can believe something in my mind but not really in my heart. Then I recollect myself and feel a presence. God is the unexpected. It’s like living next to the ocean. I don’t have to look at the water to know that I’m always beside a large body, changeable but constant and scary when I think about how deep it is but calming for that very reason.

At the same time, I’ve been given the grace to realize how self-involved I was when I first wrote this book. Truly, I was stoned on God. I had fallen deeply in love with God, but I was also—and equally—in love with the pretty idea of myself in love with God. I wanted a life of spiritual beauty, as if I were making a work of art. Fortunately, that phase didn’t last forever. These days I try to talk less and listen more.

Meanwhile, God is patient. My conversion put such a strain on my wife and kids that I’m still grateful that they didn’t walk out on me.

They stayed, though, and everyone is in good shape. The boys are now twenty-two and eighteen. Harrison is in college, and Spencer is finishing his last year of homeschooling. They haven't settled on any careers yet, and that's fine with their parents. As Lauren says, what they wind up doing for a living probably hasn't even been invented yet.

As for my business career, such as it is, I quit the job I talked about in the book, moved to my fourth hi-tech startup (a triumph of faith over reason), and finally got laid off when the dot-com bubble collapsed. I now have a modest business as a freelance writer, and Lauren works with me as chief financial officer, editor, and proofreader.

There have been bumps along the way. A few years ago I decided I could start drinking again. Big mistake. I figured that I could just drink wine, a bit of bourbon, have a civilized little party as a sensible adult. But certain guests—such as anger, anxiety, exhaustion, and two kinds of depression—kept showing up. I didn't invite you guys, I said, and they all said, the hell you didn't. So I went back and forth, dithering as some of us do, gradually drinking more and slipping back to where I was twenty years before. I realized that I wasn't the empty vessel for God that Scripture talks about, if only because my own little vessel was always filled with a drink. So I finally asked God one morning in prayer, Do you want me to stop drinking? And God said yes. Period. He didn't say it twice. So now I'm back to working my program, and this time, I sincerely pray, it's for good.

Lauren and I have also had our bumps. We're still not on the same page when it comes to the church, but our pages overlap. She's still a model of faith for me, and I see her serving others far more than I do.



Catholicism has legs. That's what I try to explain to Catholic initiates these days. I want to reassure them that the road they see in front of

them never stops. If my own experience is any measure, they'll never reach a point where there's nothing left to say or read or do. I once heard someone assert that he had "read himself out of the church," but I know that you can also read yourself back in, and the longer I read, the more I'm amazed at what is still in front of me: teachings, saints, forms of prayers, history, and traditions going back for centuries. I tell those initiates it's like finding an interesting pebble, something small and local, then looking up to see that you're on a small mound, then looking again to find that you're actually at the foot of a mountain that's backed by even higher mountains, and then, faint in the distance, the Himalayas with something even larger beyond.

There's a catch, though. Although the Catholic Church is a big table, we have to find our own unique place at the table, the one that belongs to us and to no one else. To me, this means finding the parish where I can grow as a Christian and best serve others in specific ministries. We also need to remember that our proper place at the table might change from time to time. Father Thomas Keating once said that "the god of your childhood doesn't exist," and I would suggest that the church of our childhood doesn't exist either. We have to believe as adults, and that means living that belief at the table, in community with others. A faith formed in solitude is not what this church is about. You can't be a Catholic on a desert island.

So we all gather at Mass, the heart of the church and the body of Christ, but to keep this body alive, the heart has to keep beating. We can stop this heart if we choose. It's within our power. We're the living blood of this heart, and a heart stops beating if the blood stops flowing in from the veins. The church needs attendance, new members, new ideas, and a renewal of vows from all of us. But a heart also stops beating if the arteries harden and can't carry the blood away. If we stay huddled inside our Catholic world, the church runs the danger of becoming rigid, stagnant, and eventually lifeless. So we need to

gather with God and one another at Mass, and then, filled with the bright oxygen of the Holy Spirit, we need to leave, to go outside and share the Good News with the world.

However, the world's reaction to us can be a challenge. The church is a lightning rod these days for all sorts of issues, from gender and sexuality to the whole idea of hierarchy, so if you're leading the Catholic life and you find yourself becoming a lightning rod, it helps to be well grounded. For me, grounded means community, study, and prayer—and all three centered on Christ. Is it worth all that effort? Absolutely. And I'll tell you another thing: if you keep moving forward in your faith, your life will never, ever, *ever* be boring.

So please, take my hand. Let me tell you a story. In the middle of my life, in the middle of a desert I could barely see, I discovered a vein of silver in the side of a mountain, an amazing, almost unbelievable treasure that everyone can share. I found that Someone is here, and I don't mean an impersonal "force." I mean Someone who loves us and knows us better than we'll ever know ourselves. We are not alone. We are understood.