

From Atheist to Catholic - My Conversion

Introduction

I've been putting off writing this article for a little too long. But I've been a bit at odds with the question of "Where do I even start to tell a story like this?". And then there is that little problem of trying to muster enough strength to swallow my pride and get this done. Not for my sake but for those - perhaps in my age group who in some way may feel like they either are somehow too far gone to be saved or on some level think that to be a catholic you have to be made of the right stuff.

And for those people, it would be a good idea for me to tell you that the right stuff doesn't exist and we're all a mess on some level or another. Or at least I am/was.

The Drinking Days

I suppose the best way to begin is with my life, starting somewhere from 17 or 18. Otherwise called "The best years of my life". At least that's what people kept telling me at the time. It probably won't surprise anyone who is acutely aware of the prevailing culture today that I was a big drinker. Not only in my enjoyment of my spirit or draught of choice but also in the (idiotic in hindsight) pride I took in the amount I could stomach without forgetting who or where I was and who I was with. Some kind of perverse, unspoken competition between drunkards which even then didn't make sense to me, and probably everyone else as well.

But as Solomon says in proverbs "Bad company ruins good morals" - that is if I had any real morals to speak of at the time. And my friends back then were not much better in this regard. For the sake of privacy, I'll leave their names out of it. And in any case, a basic rundown of my weekly activities will suffice to get the message across of my outward state at the time.

Just like everyone in my group, I lived for those weekends. That was the special time that occurred about three or four times a month when I could "get my drink on". So, at around 6:30 or 7:00 pm, when I returned home from work on a Friday (there was always a lot of traffic), I'd get straight on the phone with one friend and then another to organise the night out that we without doubt had been texting about since Wednesday.

We'd get dressed and meet up at our local for pre-drinks within a half hour of the phone call. Pre-drinks being the ritual in which we drink before we drink. We'd be sat down in a crowded pub for the first few hours of our night. The only opportunity we'd have on any given night to have a conversation of actual substance with each other. And we talked about drinking, people we didn't like and sometimes girls. Absolutely ground-breaking and riveting topics, I know.

From then on it was on to a pub with a dance floor (the purgatory between "prees" and the club). And then once we were absolutely loaded with booze and out of our minds, it was on to the club. The idea was to appear as sober as possible and make it past the bouncers. Before we made our way to the bar for...more drinks.

Suffice to say at this point, every night ended with at least one person either unconscious in a puddle of - let's say mystery goo, or walking home alone, angry or upset as a result of some drama that came from an interaction with some guy or some girl or some bouncer. And those were the nights I and my friends lived for. Work, home, prees, pubclub, club, oblivion, hangover. Rinse and repeat.

In truth, there was nothing about this that brought about any form of satisfaction or happiness and it certainly wasn't conducive to a good, working understanding of who I was or to what end I was born. And I'm rather ashamed to say that this cycle continued for a good few years.

But why on earth would anybody do something as stupid as this and repeat it over and over again for such a long time? As I mentioned, it wasn't happiness, it wasn't any form of fulfilment and it certainly didn't teach me anything worthwhile. Unless you count "debauchery is bad" as a worthwhile lesson that couldn't have just been learned from observing it, while sober...

At this point, I should mention that while I lived this way, my outlook on life was bleak on a good day and outright harrowing on an average one. And to be completely honest, the complete oblivion I descended into during the final stages of my nights out was probably the closest thing to peace I could obtain at the time.

Even now I'm a little hazy on what my main issue was. Because it seemed to switch regularly, one week it was my hatred of my job and the people I worked with, along with my not-too-bright career prospects and on another, it was a loneliness that came from feeling in some way unknown and misunderstood. Yes, even despite the drunken "I love you's" that got thrown my way, during the later stages of some of my drunken escapades. Not to mention my very loving and supportive family.

My outlook on my long-term future wasn't at all helped by the fact that I was surrounded at all times by people of all ages who seemed to feel the same way and who dealt with their problems as I did by drinking until they couldn't tell their right hand from their left hand. Let alone who they were or what time it was.

Looking Better

It wasn't until the age of 21 or so that I had to some extent gotten a better handle on my life. I had left the old, miserable job and gotten myself into a much more fulfilling career that I enjoyed very much and had by God's grace (yes, even then) made some phenomenal friends, with whom, whether it be work, leisure or moral support, I'm spending most of my time with even to this day.

At this point, I had more or less lost all of the overbearing causes of my misery. The unrelenting stress and hopelessness of my old job was a thing of the past and I had for better or worse been taken in by a group of people who had known and been friends with one another for their entire lives. And who through their goodwill towards one another and to me had made that lonely, misunderstood feeling disappear. It also helped that they somehow shared too many things in common with me for those things to not have their own article.

In hindsight, that was a little too much of a coincidence for it to be a total coincidence, a thought that even then, as someone who was as far from God as you can get while on earth, did make me wonder a little. Imagine getting exactly what you needed, exactly when you needed it and barely considering the idea that someone could be watching over you. Unparalleled powers of perception right there.

Love-Bombed

Despite my very positive situation and my relative control over what I would call my demons at the time, it didn't take a whole lot for me to end up spiralling into some form or another of despair, lasting a few weeks or more. Whether it be a family tragedy, heartbreak or a few hours left alone with my thoughts to contemplate my worldly or eternal future, one or more of them would eventually come to bite me in the backside.

Or more accurately, family tragedy, heartbreak etc when they struck would be followed by a few hours of contemplation of my ultimate destination and/or meaning. And since I didn't believe in God at the time, my eternal destination seemed non-existent, and ultimate meaning wasn't really anything I could make sense of.

The best thing I could hope for was maybe being remembered for something significant or through family. But realistically, once it would have been my turn to depart from the realm of the living, I myself would have been remembered by the few who met me and my name would have most likely been forgotten a few generations down the line. Not much of a substitute for eternity.

Perhaps I could find meaning in something else. Perhaps love existed. Well, looking at the divorce rate, witnessing the - let's say "modern" relationships around me and having at the time been an avid follower of more than a few existentialists, atheists and influencers that I absolutely do not care to name, I was firmly in the camp that believed that love was a biological instinct that kind of fades away over time. In other words, I believed that love was dead.

But despite these not-so-well-founded beliefs, I thought I'd allow myself to be open to the idea anyway. And then I lived happily ever after... fat chance. I needed one last good, hard lesson before things were going to improve. One which came in the form of what could be called a heartbreak.

It was a disaster and ended up being the final nail in the coffin where my faith in the worldly wants and desires I was supposed to believe in was concerned. But now that those not-so-healthy goals were gone. There was the matter of what to replace them with. And being heartbroken, feeling without purpose and devoid of joy, I needed answers fast. All things considered, this event ended up becoming the straw that broke the camel's back.

Searching for Answers

I had arrived at a place where seeking ultimate meaning had become a lost cause. And despite everything else, I was in good health and showing no signs that I was going to be leaving this world anytime soon. So why not at least enjoy life while I'm here? I thought to myself.

I started dedicating myself to my hobbies, a couple of which I could enjoy with my friends, those being fishing, camping and motorcycle riding. All three of which brought their own form of peace and for a time would stave off the despair I was dealing with and the memories of heartbreak I was looking to ignore or hopefully repress.

And they worked more or less quite well, especially fishing which affords me little time to think and feel the bad things as long as I have a book to read and rigs to craft while the carp stubbornly ignore my bait.

But they slowly began to lose their effect, which compelled me to add poetry and philosophy to my repertoire of hobbies to take my mind off of things. Those two activities afforded me an outlet that I could indulge in even during my camping and fishing trips, not so much when riding my motorcycle though.

There was also the added benefit that when those thoughts and memories came back, I was able to switch things up, find a new book or write a different way to keep things fresh and potent enough to distract me from my real problems. And it was during this time that I came across the book *Meditations* by Marcus Aurelius, one of the great stoic philosophers. Which I would still recommend even today, if I were to compare it to a book in the Bible, it would be Proverbs.

And with that philosophy, I was able to remain relatively content for a staggering two or three weeks. But all good things must come to an end as they say and by the time my stoicism drip feed had run dry and lost its effect, I was right back to square one, with nowhere else to turn.

But I had heard at some point that there was some crossover between what was written in the Bible and some of the philosophy of the stoics I had grown to adore like Marcus Aurelius and Epictetus. So, I wondered what the harm would be if I took a look and skipped over all the nonsense I had been told and had often said was in the Bible since my teenage years, for the sake of finding those few gems of wisdom I was looking for.

I ordered a Bible, opting for a Catholic one as to my surprise, I had found out that it had more books in it than your average protestant Bible. At the time, it seemed like I was getting more of my money's worth. That, in a nutshell, explains just how much I knew about the church despite my strong opinions against religion back then.

The Itch

As I recall, my Bible was taking some time to arrive. Something to do with either international shipping, custom this or that or whatever else it is that adds weeks on to a delivery. So, for the time being I was more or less stuck in the void between reading my favourite philosophers that had recently run out of answers and my latest endeavour to hopefully find some missing piece in a book that I more or less didn't really believe in as insightful, save for the odd verse here and there.

But luckily enough, I had plenty of weekend work to keep myself busy in the meantime. My work then, (and I suppose now) involved driving a van between houses to either apply some form of lawn treatment or do some mowing and return home in the same van after everything was done, usually in the early afternoon. Now, during my drive home, I would always pass nearby to a couple of churches, one of which was the Catholic Church of Our Lady in Fleet.

And for some reason, I couldn't get it out of my head, that building was entering my mind, as some form of intrusive thought every single time that I passed near it. I should probably mention that when I say that I passed near that church, I mean I drove down a street that ran parallel to the street that housed the church I'm speaking of. So, there were still a good few buildings between me and it, more than enough to obscure my view and keep me unaware of it had I not already known of its existence.

At the time, while I was still starved of meaning, depressed and in some sense, I suppose looking for answers. To accompany my regular thoughts of a building I couldn't see, I was often visited by memories of my family, friends, myself or some stranger mentioning God in a word or several. They ran like a reel of flashbacks every so often and were at their most potent while I was driving between my jobs for the day, It was more than enough to make me turn off my radio or Spotify just from the headache of having loud thoughts and loud music entering my mind at the same time, and in those moments, only one of the two had an off switch.

The memories weren't really anything profound, it was more or less of me in my earlier years, shaking my fist at God, probably because of a problem I caused. Or it was my grandad, back in my late teens, while I was going through some trial or another, gesturing to the ceiling and saying "he's putting you through a lot at the moment, but he has a plan".

Or that one time my nan prayed I'd stay away from trouble on a night out I had planned in Portsmouth, and then on that evening I came down with a sudden fever right before I was to leave my home, which rendered me bed-bound for the night and then disappeared by morning.

These memories and the thoughts of that church eventually developed into an urge to enter it. On the two occasions I felt the urge and decided to ignore it, I found myself pacing up and down my bedroom, wondering why, oh why didn't I just go into the place. Nonetheless, the urge returned during my journey past Our Lady's a third time and this was the occasion on which I finally decided to scratch that itch.

Peace at Last Pt 1

I parked my van in an awkward little parking space, up the side of a road, only a short minutes' walk from the Church of Our Lady. And that one-minute walk must've felt like a very long one, as I recall wondering exactly what it was that I was doing. But I suppose that I had reached the level of desperation at this point which meant I didn't really care to justify myself at the time. And the thought in the back of my mind of suddenly being struck by lightning or bursting into flames on entering the church didn't really seem to bother me either. At least not enough to drive me away.

We were just coming out of COVID restrictions that year, so no one was really outside, walking about as they normally would be, which created this almost eerie silence about the area. It was a comfort for me though, as I didn't really want to be seen entering the building that I was about to enter, as if it were somehow a shameful place to be.

I walked through the front door, greeting an old lady on my way in as she was on her way out and thinking to myself "I don't think anyone my age will be here". I passed around to the entrance of the main chapel, turning my immediate attention to the font of holy water on my right side.

Or rather the empty, dry-as-a-bone, tiny metal bowl thing. But not being persuaded enough by my own eyes to realise that there was no holy water, I decided to dip my hand into - nothing and make the sign of the cross on my chest, with my left hand I will add.

But I digress. After having dealt with whatever kind of episode that was, I then turned my attention to the massive, open room before me. There was not one person in sight and not the quietest sound could be heard. I took a moment to look around, taking note of what I now know to be the stations of the cross on the walls and the tile art of Mary, Jesus and the angels, placed above the altar.

When I felt comfortable enough to do so, I began walking slowly and delicately, down the walkway that went towards the front of the church, looking around to see if there was anyone there who I missed, but it was still empty. After realising I was alone, I resigned myself to a seat in the first pew, on the left side of the church, I got on my knees, not because I knew it was right, it just seemed appropriate given my situation, and I began to say a prayer.

For obvious reasons, I'll be paraphrasing this a bit, but this is very much accurate to what I would have been getting across at that moment:

"I don't know if you're listening, but if you are up there and you've been watching me, you will probably be furious with me. And I don't know if you'll want anything to do with me with the things I've done and what my attitude towards you has been all these years. But I'm desperate, and I have nowhere else to turn. I'm miserable, it's only been getting worse, and I haven't been right for over a year now. There's a girl I haven't been able to get out of my head and I can't stop thinking about it. Please, if she's no longer going to be a part of my life, I want her gone from my mind because I don't know how much longer I can deal with this."

I sat in that position for some time after finishing my prayer, dreading my return to the world outside, but I eventually stood on my feet and began slowly walking out of the church and towards my car. Things seemed to look and feel a little different on the walk back. And I remember noting to myself at the time that I ought to visit that place more often. Things were still not alright, but my heart was racing and I did feel some sense of excitement that I hadn't recognised in myself for a while.

Peace at Last Pt 2

And now, having gone through all that, we finally arrive at what I would now call my awakening, something that came completely out of nowhere and considering my status now as a devout Catholic I evidently still haven't "recovered" from and come back to what the atheists would call reality.

Later, on the evening of the same day that I had visited the church, I was meeting up with a friend of mine at a pub, just the usual, meet up to chat, go around town looking for something fun to do or someplace fun to be and head home, most likely a little tipsy. By this point, the thrill of my entry and exit to and from the church had more or less faded, and I was left, still thinking about things I'd rather not be, looking to get out of the house and distract myself with a conversation about whatever.

I didn't particularly feel like drinking that night, though I thought I should so as not to get my friend asking questions about why I wasn't getting alcohol, so needless to say, I settled for nursing a weak, watery beer. After having moved on from our first pub, we entered a very loud disco-ish pub with a dance floor, certainly too loud for any conversation to take place.

I remember being at the bar, at the front of the pub, having just received my second drink of the night, wishing they would turn the music down a bit when my rather drunk friend slurred the words "I'm going to the dance floor, I'll see you in a minute". I was somewhat relieved to

be left alone for a short while, as usually through experience I had to keep being reminded that being the sober one on a drinking night isn't fun for anyone.

But the obvious downside at that moment was the negative thoughts beginning to creep their way back into my mind as there was no one left to distract me from them. So, I more or less resigned myself to them, at the very least, appreciating the relative peace of being unbothered by the people around me and thinking that maybe I was learning to coexist with my tortured soul in some kind of harmony. Even though the thoughts were getting louder and taking the form of flashbacks now, coupled with the mounting anguish that accompanied them.

And then, as suddenly as a clap of my hands, my mind was overcome with complete silence, as though a strong wind had rushed through me and taken the thoughts and memories with it. Confused and a little startled, I tried to collect my thoughts and remember what I was thinking about. All I could get out of myself was knowing that certain things had happened in my life but not remembering faces, places or thoughts and feelings, almost as though I were thinking of something someone else had told me about, that I had not personally experienced.

And in that moment, I came to a sudden realisation. "It's all gone". All of the anguish, hopelessness and despair had rushed out of my mind so suddenly, you'd think the thought police had chased them away. And what was left was silence and confusion. Before I had even collected myself enough to wonder what on earth had happened to my head, I was suddenly reminded of my visit to the church that afternoon.

And before I thought of anything else, my eyes widened and I muttered "Holy **** is God real?" under my breath. And then for a good few minutes after, that question was playing on a loop in my head until I managed to grab my still full pint and burst through the back door of the pub to find and fall into an outdoor seat and collect myself. And in the calm of the outdoors, the question "Is God real?" eventually became "God might be real" and then finally "God is real". During the minutes that passed while this happened, I don't think I blinked.

I went home, needless to say with a lot to think about. But decided it was better to sleep it off. And when I woke up the next day, I was still at peace, and then the day after that and so on. Sometime later on, my Bible had finally arrived in the post. And considering my strange transformation that had taken place a few days ago, I thought it appropriate to read my new book straight away. I did what I'd imagine anyone reading the Bible with its manifold books, lessons, stories and subjects for the first time would do, I opened a page completely at random and began reading a random verse. And then another random page and another after that.

Each time I found myself on a new page, I found a verse or a passage which spoke to me in a way that even now I struggle to find the words to describe. My attitude towards the nonsense book was rapidly beginning to change. And before long I found myself reading from the very beginning, all the way through Genesis. Despite my difficulty understanding most of what I was reading, I did find myself researching the meaning behind verses and passages that I didn't understand as opposed to dismissing them as I normally would have.

I began immersing myself wholeheartedly in Christian theology and apologetics. At first, it was sermons by the likes of Voddie Baucham and Paul Washer, evangelical pastors, and sometimes it was delving into the world of William Lane Craig, a renowned Christian apologist. And before long, I began, with some help from the words of those I've named to consider going to church regularly.

Entering the Church

Naturally, I began my journey by attending the church of Our Lady and after a few visits asking around to see how I could become a member in an official capacity. I was looking for something face-to-face which unfortunately was not offered in Fleet at the time. So, I was forced to look elsewhere. Which is when I came across Our Lady and St Dominic. I attended my first service there, sitting, with my Nan in a seat in the back row, behind the choir, led by Martin Wood. And I was moved literally to tears by the beautiful music that accompanied each key part of the mass.

On top of that was the kindness and welcoming nature of the people who attended the same service. Something which I had not seen outside of my small circle of friends for a very long time. After walking - or floating out of the main service, I began enquiring about entering the church. I was led to ask about the RCIA programme which was being run by Deacon Paul. I sent an email enquiry, put my name down and soon after was regularly attending the RCIA classes to learn more about the faith. And by now I was more or less resolute that OLSD, despite the longer journey time was the one for me.

I was later confirmed at the Easter Vigil of 2023 and ever since have been attending OLSD one or multiple times per week, each time it seems growing in my perception of the Mass as the highlight of my week. There is nothing else that even comes close to that degree of healing in my life and there never will be.

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