

The Nativity of the Lord December 25, 2011 B

How the prayers and love of Kate's dad motivated her to return to church and the sacraments after 39 years

Recently, I was blessed to meet Kate Midden who had quietly started to return to church this past summer. After listening to Kate's story, I told her I believed that her journey home to the church could touch many others, and asked if she would be willing to put her story in our Christmas bulletin. Kate agreed. Here is her story.

My father was raised a Catholic and my mother converted to Catholicism when they married. My six brothers and I went to church every Sunday and Holy Day, confession every week, attended Catholic school when we could and CCD when Catholic school wasn't available (my Dad was in the military so we moved often). I was a joy to my parents. I was proud of being a Catholic and I considered being a nun when I grew up.

When I was thirteen, I fell off a cliff...not literally but figuratively. I got involved in drugs, sex, stopped attending school, and fought going to church. I was kicked out of school and the house at age sixteen. The last time I attended church was in 1972 – thirty-nine years ago.

I reconciled with my parents when I was twenty and they, but in particular my father, have been praying for years that I would return to church. Every phone conversation and every visit, he'd ask "Katie, are you back at church? I've been praying for you. I want you to have a happier, more fulfilling life on earth and eternal life in heaven." I'd cringe and say, "Dad, I'm thinking about it" or "Dad, I feel close to God without the Church" or "Dad, I'm going to go to the Episcopal Church with friends – it's like the Catholic Church but not as rigid." His standard response was "I'm glad you're going to church, Katie, but I'm praying that you'll return to the Catholic Church."

I saw my father this June and was struck by the realization of how frail he was. As I was leaving to drive home, he hugged me and whispered, "I'm

praying for you, Katie. I know the Holy Spirit will bring you home soon." On my eight-hour drive back to Florida I couldn't stop thinking about my father and how important it was to him that I rejoin the church. What was I so afraid of? What harm could it do? I have always had a strong faith, always considered myself a Christian, didn't think I needed "church" but if it would make my father happy, why not just go?

It still took me several weeks of soul searching, making excuses, trying to convince any one of my friends to accompany me (no takers) until finally I settled on the perfect date – my Dad's eighty-second birthday. What better gift to give him?

I slipped in the side door at the 5:30 Mass at Ascension on the 31st of July 2011. I got to church early and sat in the back row hidden next to a big column. I was overwhelmed being in the church and was flooded with emotion – fear, relief, peace, amazement, joy. Mass started and I was glued to every word, every movement. I felt like the priest was speaking to me – like he knew I needed to hear the words he was saying. When we started singing "Lamb of God, you take away the sins of the world, have mercy on us," uncontrolled tears ran down my face. "Lord, I am not worthy to receive you." When everyone else went to Communion, I slipped out the door.

My simple gift for my father was the best gift I've ever given myself. It didn't take long before I realized I wanted and needed more than Mass. I wanted to connect to other Catholics. I wanted to learn more about my faith. I wanted to learn more about the Bible. I started sharing with my non-Catholic and non-practicing Catholic friends about how exciting it was to get re-involved in the church and how much easier my life, my job, and life's challenges were when I shared them with God.

None of them wanted to go to church with me, but they watched with interest, asked questions, and tried to figure out what was going on with their friend. I took the bulletin home every week and tried to get somebody interested in "retreats" or "meetings" or "fellowships" because I didn't want to go by myself, but realized it was up to me to move

forward in faith. I bravely signed up for “Why Catholic” and was assigned to an incredible group who has taught me why it’s so important to get involved and become part of a church family. They are supportive, encouraging, and full of wisdom and grace and have enriched my experience of coming back to the church in so many ways.

The hardest step for me was Reconciliation but because I wanted to receive Communion, I knew I needed to take this step in order to make a complete return to the church. I also knew that depending on the rules of the church and the decision I made, I would be reconnecting for good, as an adult, and making an adult decision to spend the rest of my life serving God as a Catholic. I met with Father Tobin on Halloween. I laugh now because I was shaking with fear driving to meet with him. The last time I’d talked face to face with a priest was when I was sixteen. Father was so easy to talk to and shared several options but we both agreed that it would be best if we met at a later date so I could prepare – I wanted to do this right. Father gave me some wonderful reading material before I left including a booklet on *Preparing for the Sacrament of Reconciliation*, *Daily Prayers For the People of God*, and a wonderful book by Matthew Kelly called *Rediscover Catholicism*. All three of these are well worn and well-read now, as is my Bible.

I will receive Holy Communion this year on Christmas. I am filled with joy just thinking of receiving such an amazing gift. I can’t wait to call my Dad and thank him for believing in me and praying for me for so many, many years.

Since I’ve returned to church, my job situation has changed, impacting my finances, and I lost my wonderful dog to cancer but I’ve found strength in the Lord that’s kept me moving forward, excited about the opportunity to grow and blossom in both my life and my faith. I’m thrilled about moving forward in the church, getting more involved, meeting more people, helping others, and learning more about my Lord and Savior. And I’m excited that two of my friends who’ve been watching my journey both plan to attend church with me in the New Year.

[For the past eight years, I've been working to assist military families with the challenges of deployments, employment/unemployment, and unmet needs. I've worked with active duty members and families from all branches of service, veterans and families, war-wounded and caregivers, and widows/widowers. If you wish to get in touch, email me at kmidden@homefronthearts.org.]

If you have a non-churchgoing family member, friend, co-worker or neighbor, please consider sharing Kate’s story with them.

If you, like Kate, were raised Catholic but are now disconnected from your Catholic roots, why not follow Kate’s example and give church a second chance. What have you to lose? If you decide to give church a second chance, please consider connecting with some ministry or study group at our church.

KATHLEEN SHARES HOW SHE REMAINS ACTIVE IN THE CHURCH DESPITE HER TEMPTATION TO SOMETIMES LEAVE IT.

Kathleen Hockey is a social worker, author and speaker. She writes the following:

Sometimes I am not sure I keep the faith. During those times, with a flip of the hand, I say, “I’m done with this!” I rant and rave, badmouth the new conservative trends in the church, and sometimes (horrors) I skip Mass in a sort of twisted statement of discontent. I ask myself why I should be active in a church that spends so much time on the issues of liturgical semantics and sexual mores, while at the same time attempting to convince the world of the virtue of celibacy. What about poverty, alienation, and genocide?

Yet in spite of these times of disgust, I find myself volunteering, participating, and thinking the struggle is worth it. The church, after all, is more than institutional majesty and a few self-proclaimed keepers of orthodoxy.

The faith community where I worship has no less than 30 ministries, most of which exist to serve the poor, sick, grieving, and incarcerated. The pastor has delegated all parish administrative responsibilities to deacons and lay people while he spiritually ministers to the faithful—and the not-so-faithful. He is so well liked that three retired priests—one conservative, one liberal, and one physically challenged—have made their home at our parish. Having four priests of such different persuasions and gifts provides a model of religious diversity. Needless to say, our church is full on Sunday with women and men serving at the altar, the veiled and jean-clad all kneeling together, worshipping in genuine camaraderie.

This kind of parish community is why I remain faithful. It gives me hope that in spite of the polarization and injustice so often talked about and bemoaned, in many corners of the church world, tolerance, equality, and charity prevail quietly.

There is one more thing that keeps me faithful. It is the realization that our church is a global church. While I am safe and sound in the United States, both male and female Catholics in other countries are being suppressed or exterminated for the faith. Willingness to die rather than not be Catholic makes the pettiness here seem downright sinful.

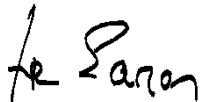
James Joyce famously described the church as “here comes everybody.” Every Sunday, most Catholic churches, including Ascension, are packed with faith-filled people who are very different politically, economically, theologically and spiritually.

So what keeps you coming to church? Have you ever left and returned? What brought you back? I would love to hear your story. If you live in the area and do not normally attend church, do consider coming to our parish mission next month.

Writings on website that may interest visitors

I have a lot of writings on the website that may interest visitors to our area. These include, 28 articles on the Catechism of the Catholic Church, articles on the first 26 books of the Old Testament, commentaries on the Sunday Mass readings, and more.

Have a blessed Christmas,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Fr. Aaron". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.