

"I Could Not Stay... What I Was!"

A Convert Through The Catholic Enquiry Centre

By Mrs Eleanor Emmerson

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FOREWORD

The factors which help a non-Catholic to find the true Faith are always many and varied. Mrs. Emmerson's story is a typical example of how, under the grace of God, the sincere searcher can be helped step by step along the road to Faith by the variety of efforts that are being made by Australian Catholics to share their priceless gift of Faith with others. At one stage it is a chance meeting with a Catholic schoolgirl who lives her Faith; later it is the example of a sincere young Catholic couple; then a Catholic advertisement in a secular magazine, or a Catholic radio programme; finally the parish praesidium of the Legion of Mary bringing her into contact with the local priest. At every stage, she is impressed and encouraged, not by arguments, but by the living example of Catholics' charity and confidence in prayer.

Mrs. Emmerson tells the story of her conversion with a simplicity and humility that makes it a joy to read and an inspiration to the reader. Her search was a long and prayerful one. From our small share in it at the Catholic Enquiry Centre while she studied our course of lessons we have a file of more than fifty pages of personal correspondence closing with the good news that she and her husband and children had been received into the Church.

There are, in 1962, still more than 8,000,000 Australians who live without the Gift of Faith. Many of them are searching as Mrs. Emmerson searched. It is the highest form of charity to help them to find the True Faith. This simple and sincere story will encourage many to keep on searching. I am confident, too, that it will encourage many Catholics to be more sympathetic towards the problems of non-Catholics and to make a greater effort to share their Faith with those around them. Thomas A. White Director, Catholic Enquiry Centre, P.O. Box 287, Darlinghurst NSW 2010

THERE have been hundreds of conversion stories written and no doubt, anyone who may read this has read at least a half a dozen of its kind and better, before now.

In spite of this, I feel I should write my story. Perhaps someday, someone might have similar difficulties, and God may wish to help that person through my experience.

My chief reason, however, is to say Thank You - Thank You first of all and most humbly to my Lord Jesus and His Blessed Mother, and then to the many good Catholics who have helped me find the peace I know today.

It is difficult to say when I first became impressed by the Catholic way of life. I had noticed the quiet ladylike behaviour of the Convent 'school girls, the seriousness with which young Catholics

approached courtship, and the quiet faith Catholics showed in their whole attitude to life - and most especially in their troubled times.

I must admit that, in spite of all this, I had no desire to become a Catholic. I considered that the complicated Catholic services were a far cry from the teaching of the Carpenter of Nazareth - and I wasn't the kind of person to blindly obey, as I believed Catholics did. I wanted to be able to ask questions and have them answered.

AN ADVERTISEMENT

It was just this inquisitiveness of mine that caused me to take a definite step towards the Catholic religion, although I did not realize that I was doing that at the time. An advertisement in an English magazine offered to explain the Catholic religion - FREE! I couldn't resist it!

When the English Enquiry Centre put me in contact with the Australian Enquiry Centre, I began to hesitate. They promised that all enquiries would be confidential and that no representative of theirs would call. I doubted that they would keep their word (such was the distrust I had been taught to have of Catholics - especially Catholic priests) but my inquisitiveness overruled my caution and I began to receive their course of lessons. (Of course, they DID keep their word!)

FIRST LESSONS

The first lessons were certainly not what I had expected. My previous thoughts had been that the Catholic Church was the "Church of the Pope." These lessons made me realize that Catholics put Jesus at the head of their church as do all sincere Christians. The Pope is the earthly head of the Catholic Church and he claims to be nothing more than this.

The first two lessons urged me to pray - they suggested the prayers I should use and because I had not prayed for years - I used their prayers.

When the lessons began to explain the Catholic attitude to the Bible - I began to be genuinely impressed. The Catholic Church can undoubtedly trace itself right back to the time Our Lord said to St. Peter - "On this rock, I will build my Church." (N.B. He did not say Churches, see Matthew 16:18.) This same St. Peter was the first Pope, and the Catholic Church can trace her line of Popes from that time. Every Christian Church (and there are about 500, I believe) accepts the Bible as the God-inspired writings - but the Catholic Church was the only one in existence at the time these writings were sorted out from the uninspired writings - every Church that accepts the Bible as inspired accepts it on the authority of the Catholic Church. I had also been taught that Catholics were not allowed to read the Bible - this of course is not true - far from not being allowed to read the Bible - Catholics are encouraged to do so.

I have always prided myself in being fair, so in my next letter to Father White, director of the Enquiry Centre, I admitted that the Catholic Church was the one - and only - Church started by Jesus. I hastened to add, however, that I had no intention of becoming a Catholic.

Father White replied that there was no need for me to make any quick decisions, but if I truly believed that Jesus had built a Church, and that that Church was the Catholic Church, then I had a duty to God to become a member of His Church.

A good many people claim that the Catholic Church has erred. Either I had to accept the fact that Christ had not enough power to sustain His Own Church against error - that man had to do that for

Him (I didn't dare think which of the many founders of religions had actually corrected the error!), or else I had to become a Catholic.

It was nearly two years before I made my decision.

GROWING INTEREST

From that time, my study of the Catholic religion was of necessity a serious one. I could no longer have that detached interest in what Catholics believe - I had to discover what I should believe.

As is natural, I looked for extra sources of learning than the Enquiry Centre. Among these I discovered two radio programmes - a broadcast of the Novena and Father Cronin's "Catholic Session."

This was when my husband first took an interest in religion - any religion. We began to look forward to these programmes - we began to say: "Don't these programmes give you a good feeling to start the week?"

I started to pray more earnestly. Whenever I was too worried to sleep (which was often at that time) I would say the Hail Mary over and over again. Father Cronin spoke on his Catholic Session about the Miraculous Medal. My husband and I started wearing them.

I waited anxiously for each week's lesson from the Enquiry Centre. My objections were answered one by one. Everything about the Catholic religion had a reason - most of it could be backed up from my own Bible, or from the commonest of common sense.

I had accepted the fact that the Catholic Church was the One True Church - but I still thought that I, personally, could never become a Catholic. I studied the causes of the Reformation. True - there were many unworthy Catholics at that time (even among the clergy), but the doctrine of the Church remained the same as it had been since Jesus had taught it to the twelve Apostles. I sought out and read anti-Catholic literature. Most of it was so obviously inaccurate as to be quite stupid. None of it stood up to close investigation.

I received my final lesson from the Enquiry Centre and I replied to the final questionnaire. I told Father White exactly how I felt - how one day I was sure I should be a Catholic; how the next day I was full of doubts again. I expected him to send a very forceful reply - I rather hoped he would - I wanted someone to give me that extra push - someone who would make that final decision for me.

Of course, he didn't do that. He urged me to keep on praying and assured me that God would answer my prayers. Catholics have such a strong faith in God that they have no need to "sales-talk" anyone into a decision.

They claim that the gift of Faith is a gift of God. They will explain their religion to you, answer your questions, pray for you - but the gift of Faith they leave to God to give - and you to accept.

CONTACT WITH CATHOLICS

All of this time, my husband and I had been wearing the Miraculous Medal at various intervals. Someone from the local Church had seen it, supposed that I was a Catholic, told the priest who sent two ladies from the Legion of Mary to visit me.

We have become used to people coming into our home trying to convert us to their own personal beliefs but these ladies were quite different. They didn't preach - instead they answered my

questions, told me to send for them if ever I needed help, talked about their own families and in general offered me their friendship and promised to call and see me again soon.

I decided to go up and see the local Church for myself - I looked around very carefully so that no one would see me - then slipped inside. I wanted to see what a Catholic Church looked like, and I admit that the last thing I thought about doing was praying, but in the atmosphere of that Church I had to go down on my knees.

I mentioned this feeling to the ladies from the Legion of Mary when next they came. They told me that it was the Real Presence of Christ that gave that atmosphere. They explained that the Real Presence was the reason Catholics cross themselves with Holy Water, and genuflect on entering and leaving the Church. It is also the reason why Catholics so often slip into the Church through the day to say a little prayer.

I had, of course, studied and accepted the Catholic teaching on this, but I was quite unprepared to feel the atmosphere. This incident taught me that the Catholic faith, is not merely a form of worship, although I believed Catholics practised the correct form of worship. The Catholic Faith is Christ Himself, and through Holy Communion, every practising Catholic is a part of the living body of Christ. Now I realized where Catholics gain their strength.

DIFFICULTIES ARISE

I also knew that I should become a Catholic, and believe me it was an uncomfortable feeling. There were rules that I must obey as a Catholic that were completely opposite to my own personal desires.

The Church to which I belonged at that time taught that as long as you love Jesus, you cannot go wrong - yet here was I - accepting the Catholic teaching that birth prevention was morally wrong - and at the same time feeling that it was equally wrong to have more children than I could manage.

This problem bothered me for months. I wished that I could forget all about the Catholic religion - but I knew that if I did, I would be turning my back on Jesus and could no longer even claim that I loved Him.

Still the Catholics did no more than assure me of their prayers. Their complete faith in prayer is something that has to be seen to be believed. One Legion of Mary lady asked me if I was praying, and when I said yes, asked: "But, have you prayed to Our Lady?" I came straight home and wrote all my muddled thoughts and problems down and sent it to the Novena of Our Lady of Perpetual Succour at the Redemptorist Fathers' Monastery in Mayfield, N.S.W.

I spoke to no one on the subject over the next fortnight, but my thinking completely changed. I recognized my children as gifts from God and for the first time I thanked Him for those gifts. I realized that the methods of birth prevention that we were using were a direct insult to God. It was like saying: "Yes, God, I will accept Your gifts, but I will not accept Your assurance that You will care for us, even as the lilies of the field. I will not trust You to know how many children we should have, and I will not trust You to care for us, and those children that You give us."

I began to look around at the Catholic families that I knew - both the large and the small. Many were not rich but all had the necessities of love, adequate clothing, food, dwelling and education.

A week later, my husband and I went to a "Day of Enquiry." Up till this time, I had always thought that - if I became a Catholic - I would be the only one in the family. However, that night when we were discussing the day, my husband said: "Eleanor, do you really want to be a Catholic?"

"Yes, I do."

"So do I," he said.

Our Lady had answered my petition in a very wonderful way.

Now at last I could contact the local priest and ask to be given instructions in the Catholic Faith. It took me a full day to pluck up the courage.

When Father called, my courage went floating out of the window again, but it did not take long for us all to feel at ease with each other. Father spoke about Jesus as if it were the most natural thing in the world to do. One of the first things I noticed about a priest (and this applies to them all) is, that - in spite of the fact that they are so very easy to talk to - I have never felt half as much respect for any other minister of religion. (I do have the greatest of admiration for the sincerity of some non-Catholic ministers). You can speak to a priest as a friend and a few minutes later kneel before him and beg him to forgive you your sins without feeling embarrassed on either occasion. It sounds impossible but the Sacrament of Holy Orders does make all that difference. Naturally, as they, and we, are only human, there will be occasions when we find ourselves unable to like the man who is a priest - but we can always respect the priest.

I WENT TO THE PRIEST

Then followed months of weekly instructions. There was no "back to school" atmosphere - it was just a series of friendly helpful talks. We always felt free to say: "But, Father, I don't understand that," or even in some cases: "But, Father, I can't believe that." No amount of explaining was too much trouble.

FINAL STEP: RECEPTION

Then came the time for our reception into the Church. To my husband and me it was something for which we longed. Already we had been trying to live the life of a Catholic without the help of the Sacraments and were much happier for it. Now we were to receive the graces of the Sacraments.

Our reception consisted of three things. We knelt at the altar rail and with our right hand on the Gospels we made a short and simple declaration of faith, then followed our (Conditional) Baptism and for the first time we received the Sacrament of Penance. (There had been considerable uncertainty if we had ever been correctly baptized, or even baptized at all, when we were children which is why we were 'conditionally' baptized into the church and then went on to ensure all our sins were removed by the Sacrament of Penance or Reconciliation.)

Before I started to study the Catholic religion, I had a lot of strange ideas about Confession. (Incidentally, Christ's command that we confess to a priest can be read in any Bible. See John 20:22-23, and 2 Cor 5:18) For instance I thought it consisted entirely of telling the priest your sins - which was good for humility but not much else. Confession means so very much more than this. Firstly you have to be really sorry and intend to make an effort not to sin again. If you are not sorry and do not intend to try to avoid sin, then you might as well stay at home. Once in the Confessional the priest blesses you then follows the actual confession of your sins - usually the priest has a little talk to you about your difficulties and gives some advice. Then he gives absolution while you are saying a prayer telling God how very sorry you are for your sins. After you leave the Confessional you say the prayer that the priest has given you as a penance. There is, of course, no money

involved. We are certainly not asked to pay 3d per sin as a non-Catholic asked me after I had made my first confession.

There is a great deal more to be learnt about Confession, but I mention these points only to show that confession is sincere and of the most wonderful value to the soul of the penitent.

When I made my first confession - I had to admit to many wasted and wicked years. I wanted to forget them altogether and although my confessor was very kind and very helpful - my confession was like an infection that had to be lanced - it was essential to the healing but at the time it did hurt.

I didn't sleep that night. I didn't feel forgiven. I thought over my confession again and again. I was sorry, oh, how very sorry for all of my sins. My husband said: "Doesn't it feel wonderful to have made your confession and have a really fresh start again?" To my husband, I said: "Yes," but to God I prayed: "What is the matter with me, why don't I feel any better, why don't I have that walking on air feeling that every other convert has - surely I have not spent two years making the wrong decision?"

FIRST COMMUNION

Arrangements had been made for us to be confirmed the following Sunday night so I had to take my first Holy Communion on Sunday Morning. Oh, how I meant it when I said: "Lord, I am not worthy!" I had never felt more guilty in all my life!

As I walked to the altar rail, I had to force myself to forget my own problems and think of Jesus. It was only after Jesus, really and truly present in the bread - came to me that I knew I had made the right decision after all.

I don't know what caused the difficulty with my first confession. Perhaps God was teaching me that it isn't always possible to feel "good," but it is essential to keep persevering. Perhaps it was to show me that I could never be really free unless I became a living part of Him as in Communion. Perhaps it was just a reaction to nervousness. I know that since I have been able to overcome this nervousness, I have found confession a really great comfort. Each time it is as if the vision of Christ that I have blurred up with my sins has been cleared once more. Holy Communion becomes an even greater source of comfort and strength every time I am privileged to take it.

GOD FOUNDED THIS CHURCH

Before I became a Catholic, I believed that as long as you love Jesus, you cannot go wrong. I haven't altered my belief in that respect. However, now I realize that to love Jesus - I must also love, support and be a member of the Church He founded (in preference to loving one founded by a man however sincere he might have been). I must love and trust His Mother - I must try to the best of my ability and with the help of the grace He Himself gives, to obey the rules of good moral behaviour and the rules of His Church.

CONVICTION, NOT FEAR

I am not blindly obedient - Catholics are given every help and encouragement to learn about every aspect of their religion. I understand why the various Church rules exist, and I obey or try to obey as a child obeys a loving and understanding father. The Catholic services, now that I understand them, are simple yet dignified and inspiring.

I am not ruled by fear of Hell or Purgatory. (Incidentally, I am not asked to pay my way out of either of these places as non-Catholic friends warned me that I would have to do.) I believe that they exist, but I do not fear them as much as I fear hurting and insulting Jesus. He has suffered so much for us already, and I know that every time I do the wrong thing - He suffers even more.

I pray particularly every day for those, who have come to the stage of knowing that the Catholic Faith is the One True Faith and yet are unwilling or unable to accept. I know how hard the practice of the Catholic religion is to someone on the outside looking in - and as a Convert I do not always find it easy to live by. I also know that this sense of peace and freedom that I have, is worth a hundred times more effort than I am asked to put into it. All that Jesus asks is that we try - that no matter how many times and how badly we fail - we tell Him we are sorry, and we get up and we try again. He understands - oh, how much He understands.

There are many and varied paths that lead to the Catholic faith - My husband and I travelled completely different ways, so much so, that for most of the time we did not even realize we were headed for the same decision, but we both agree, as does every other convert, that it was the wisest and happiest decision we have ever made.
