



# BISHOPS' CONFERENCE OF ENGLAND & WALES

## JOURNEYS OF FAITH 2011

MARCH 2011

Each year thousands of people from all walks of life ask to be received into the Catholic Church. A lorry driver, doctor, law clerk and a student are among those taking the step this year. Their stories are below.

### 1) Lynne from Newcastle

'Since joining the Journey in Faith RCIA group and having made the decision to become a Catholic I feel a lot more content in myself... I feel really at home in the Church and more spiritually nourished. I really enjoy the homilies and the music is so uplifting.'

### 2) Stefan from Greenhithe in Kent

'Beginning RCIA was a very liberating experience. When the priest leader – Fr Tim – said at times, 'I don't know,' it freed me from having to work it all out and I could surrender to some things simply being a mystery.'

### 3) Clare from Arundel and Brighton Diocese

'...Then Pope Benedict visited our country. We watched virtually every step of his journey and my sons and I joined a pilgrimage to Hyde Park. I was absolutely amazed at my dawning recognition that here in the Pope I was seeing Christ's true representative on earth.'

### 4) Michael from Portsmouth

'One time when I visited St Mark's Basilica in Venice, the peace was so tangible that I didn't want to leave... something centred on me and it was something that I'd never experienced in my life before... In response to that experience I knew it was time for me to make enquiries about becoming a Catholic.'

### 5) Bethany, originally from Beverley near Hull

'I think God has always been drawing me along my journey – at the difficult times and at the best times. One of my favourite stories is titled "Footprints" and I have always felt the significance of this at the hardest point of my life when I have felt the strength and gentle touch of God's love and the presence of Jesus helping me through.'

### 6) Thomas from Arundel and Brighton Diocese

'It was my presence in Rome that led me first to realise that the Catholic Church was my true home. I have always been greatly intrigued, if not impressed by the beauty of the liturgy... yet it was only after that time in Rome that I realised what it was all for: For God, in his honour.'

### 1) Lyne's Journey of Faith, Hexham and Newcastle Diocese

I have lived in Newcastle all my life – a born and bred Geordie from Walker and High Heaton. I came from a family of eight children and was baptised Church of England. During the fifties I remember going to Sunday School as a small child, and by the time I was about twelve years old I knew that I wanted to become a Catholic as my mother was a Catholic and I used to like the way she prayed and was especially attracted to her love of Mary and the Rosary.

I got married and had four children, who are grown up now. For a long time I was a very committed Anglican and often went to daily mass in the Anglican church but gradually found that my feelings about the issue of

ordination of women, and soon to become bishops, was drawing me to the Catholic Church. In addition the very real and pervasive love of Mary which I found in the Catholic Church so much attracted me. In the end it was this which was the final deciding point in my Journey to Catholicism – I really wanted to be able to freely express my love for Mary in worship and prayer.

Since joining the Journey in Faith RCIA group and having made the decision to become a Catholic I feel a lot more content in myself and, as I haven't got this anxiety, I feel really at home in the Church and more spiritually nourished. I really enjoy the homilies and the music is so uplifting.

If somebody is thinking of becoming a Catholic I would say to them – 'Go for it!' It hasn't all been easy though – one of the difficult things has been leaving my Anglican community and the people I worship with there and with whom I can now no longer receive communion.

I'm looking forward to the Easter Vigil and being able to receive communion in the Catholic Church – being a one-time daily communicant in the Anglican Church it has at times been difficult not to be able to receive communion during this Journey of Faith. But The Journey itself has been so important and I've learnt a lot and I've enjoyed meeting everyone and sharing the Journey together.

## **2) Stefan is a law clerk from Greenhithe in Kent**

I was born in East Dulwich before soon moving to Kent where I grew up. I'm 36 years old, have one brother and no children and work for the Metropolitan Police as a law clerk in their legal department.

Between the ages of 4 – 10 I went to Methodist Sunday School but was never baptised. My parents felt that I should make up my own mind once I was old enough. When I was 8 I started to play football on a Sunday morning so gradually stopped going to the school, but even now I'm grateful for the experience because I learnt so much about the Bible and prayer.

At senior school I joined the Christian Fellowship and was heavily involved until I did my GCSE's, but I never went to a church on Sunday. However, as I got older I developed lots of questions, especially about the Bible. I thought, 'Is this what Jesus really taught?' But, I couldn't find the answers anywhere. No one seemed to be able to provide answers that would satisfy me or they didn't answer at all.

In 1987 I went on a school trip to Rome. Pope John Paul II came out onto St Peter's Square and I thought that I wouldn't mind being part of that. Our group didn't go inside the church but I was very impressed and I bought a cross there. Seeing Pope John Paul II was an influential moment but I was too young to do anything about it. When I left school I started to look at other religious systems including Buddhism, Islam and the Occult, but all the time I was doing this I had a niggling feeling that I should return to Christianity. I gradually began to notice contradictions in these religions and was anxious not to follow the wrong one. I found Buddhism too diverse. The Occult seemed to promote many beliefs and Gods including man being a God himself. Though eventually for me it seemed to be about choosing beliefs that suited you. I never got too involved because something inside stopped me from doing so.

I always felt that God was drawing me back, but I had to go through this process to find the truth. In 2003 I started a BA in History and Archaeology concentrating on Ancient Greece and Rome. Many of my essays concerned the Early Church. I began to recognise, as a lot of my studies concerned Catholicism, that I felt drawn to it. I could see that a lot of the questions I had been asking were answered in the early period of the Church's history. St Augustine and others answered my questions. What I liked about Catholicism was that if it didn't have the answer it'd say so and either try to find out or admit that some things are a mystery. In 2005 I found myself glued to the television following the coverage of the death of Pope John Paul II and the election of Pope Benedict. The 'niggle' to become a Catholic was still there.

In 2007 when I finished my degree, I did my dissertation on persecution in the Early Church and studied Church documents. This all got me looking at the Church's teachings and I read a great deal. I was particularly

impressed by the teaching about Apostolic Succession and the fact that you can trace the teachings and authority of the Church back to Jesus. I felt at that time I was getting somewhere in my search. I really liked that in the Catholic Church things are debated for a long time before an answer is offered. There is a hierarchy and leadership to guide you on your own journey.

I am now studying a MA on Classical Civilisation looking at the life and work of St Augustine and I like what I've learnt.

In 2008 I asked a Catholic friend about how to become a Catholic but nothing happened. I then asked two more friends but just didn't know what to do. Then there was the visit of Pope Benedict in September 2010 and I saw him as he drove up the Embankment in Westminster. People were chanting like it was a football match. I also watched the visit on television and I thought again, 'I must do this.' Shortly after, a Catholic friend and I went to visit Westminster Cathedral and he helped me to find a priest to talk to. The priest told me that from what we had discussed he thought I was ready to take another step and I joined the RCIA group (for those exploring becoming Catholic).

Beginning RCIA was a very liberating experience. When the priest leader – Fr Tim – said at times, 'I don't know,' it freed me from having to work it all out and I could surrender to some things simply being a mystery. I found all the priests very nice and helpful and have also made friends with other members of the group. There is a community atmosphere and it's a bit like joining a family. Everyone supports each other and it works.

I feel that I've found a new community. Before I wasn't happy and didn't feel complete. Now I do and I feel much more settled and content. If anyone reading this is thinking about exploring becoming Catholic I'd encourage them to jump. I think people can get scared and don't do it. Once you begin RCIA you'll see others who are at the same stage as you. So take the jump because you'll be happier for it. Don't wait; go and speak to someone as early as possible.

### **3) Clare is a doctor from Arundel and Brighton Diocese**

I was baptised into the Church of England at the age of 3 months and confirmed in the Episcopalian Church in America when I was 15. I was very much influenced both by the fairly liberal Anglican views of my mother and the open-minded agnosticism and scientific background of my father. From both of them I inherited a deep mistrust of anything connected with Roman Catholicism, which persisted for many years.

In my 30's I started attending an Anglo-Catholic church and for the first time encountered incense and statues of Mary; I developed a greater awareness of the sacraments and began to accept the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist. So much of my worship was catholic yet I was still very much anchored in the C of E and went through considerable anguish when my husband decided to convert to Catholicism. However when we moved to East Sussex we found an active group of ecumenically minded Christians and I always found a welcome and felt at home among the family of worshippers in my husband's new church.

Our two boys would sometimes attend with my husband, sometimes with me; it must have been hard for them as they grew older; there was always the struggle, the indecision, the final parting look as one of them wondered if they had made the wrong choice that day. I became active in the local Anglican church, joining a home group and the PCC, being included on all the rotas for sidemen, intercessions and coffee duties, even assisting with Communion.

Several significant events occurred over the past two years; a Catholic friend lent me a copy of "One Lord, One Faith" written by a former Anglican priest who converted to Catholicism. I felt the first stirrings of something pulling me towards a taking a tentative step towards conversion. I began to feel strangely disturbed; intellectually I could now see how the Roman Catholic Church could indeed claim to represent the true faith handed down from the apostles through Peter, although could not acknowledge this truth yet in my heart. I could recognize that Christ founded his Church on earth and intended it to be one body. Looking around the

world where but in the Roman Catholic Church could I recognize such unity?

Then we went to Rome where my son's faith took a tremendous leap forward and he returned to England saying he wanted to consider becoming confirmed in the Catholic Church. He started attending Mass regularly and I was thrilled by the glow in his face but sad that he was moving further from me.

Then Pope Benedict visited our country. We watched virtually every step of his journey and my sons and I joined a pilgrimage to Hyde Park. I was absolutely amazed at my dawning recognition that here in the Pope I was seeing Christ's true representative on earth. All my prejudices and fears melted away as I recognized the love and humility shining out of his eyes.

My friend gave me a book by Scott Hahn which discussed the Biblical basis for many Catholic customs and I read each chapter as another step forward in joyful growth and understanding.

My sons and I have been receiving instruction from our parish priest and gradually everything is becoming clearer. I am still on a journey of discovery and cannot yet fully understand all that the Catholic Church believes and teaches. However I have come to a point where I can truly stand up and say that I do believe all that it teaches is true and I will continue to explore, understand and embrace that truth which comes from God alone. I know that my decision has been the right one. Already so much of my life has been transformed; our family have grown closer, my love for my husband has grown even stronger. I feel that all my spiritual life has been a preparation for a journey: a journey that is only just beginning and will take many years but is the road I must take towards my God.

#### **4) Michael is a lorry driver from Portsmouth**

My name is Michael and I'm a 63 year old heavy goods driver. I'm the eldest of five children, am divorced and have two grown up daughters and two grandsons.

I grew up in Portsmouth in the 1950s and went to Sunday school as a child so got my religious background from there, as well as through attending a Church of England School. I was never actually baptised even though my siblings were. It just never happened.

About fifteen years ago I began the habit of sitting quietly at the back of Catholic churches as I travelled all over Europe, especially Italy. One time when I visited St Mark's Basilica in Venice, the peace was so tangible that I didn't want to leave. I'd gone there to experience the Mass and sat at the back to listen. Then this feeling of peace came over me, something centred on me and it was something that I'd never experienced in my life before. I just sat there for two hours and didn't want to leave. It was a powerful experience of God's presence.

In response to that experience I knew it was time for me to make enquiries about becoming a Catholic. When I got back to England I found myself visiting Catholic churches regularly and it was a really peaceful experience. I have a friend who is a Catholic and she who took me to her local Catholic church and I joined the Journey of Faith (which is the name of a group for those exploring becoming Catholic) in September 2010.

I find that when I go to Mass I come out feeling more relaxed and peaceful. My life has become more peaceful. I feel like I've joined a family. The people at the parish I go to are really nice and friendly. I've felt welcome. Fear hasn't been an issue for me, at any point. Peace has been the consistent thing that I've felt since joining the Journey of Faith group. I really look forward to our meetings on Wednesday night where a mix of people is gathered. I suppose because I grew up learning Bible stories it's made the experience of joining a church group really comfortable.

I feel really excited about becoming a Catholic because it feels like a home coming. My sponsor is called John and he'll be with me when I go to the Cathedral to publicly state my intention to join the Church on the first Sunday in Lent. It would be really daunting to do that on your own and it helps to have someone there. I have a sense of my personal 'jigsaw of life' coming together. I've travelled to some many places since the

age of 15 through joining the army, then becoming a merchant seaman and truck driver. I've probably seen three quarters of the world and am now back in Portsmouth. I am more religious than I'd previously realised. Becoming a Catholic is a very personal choice. It's important that people feel free in their choice. Whatever someone decides it's been my experience that everyone is made very welcome.

#### **5) Bethany is a student, originally from Beverley near Hull**

I was born and raised in a small market town called Beverley outside of Hull in the East Riding of Yorkshire. I was baptised in the Church of England as my father is Church of England. My two older brothers and my sisters – there are five of us altogether – were all baptised Church of England. I went to a Roman Catholic school as I have a Roman Catholic mother.

I really loved my Catholic school, and have happy memories of it. I did wonder though, at the age of seven, why I wasn't making my first communion alongside most of the class I was in – I just assumed I would. My mum is from the West Coast of Ireland and each year we go to Ireland in the summer and everybody there is a Catholic – all my friends there who I played with when we were young, and I went to church with everybody there. The people at church were so friendly and welcoming always.

This is one of the attractive things about all the Catholic churches I have been in – in Ireland, in Hull and now in Newcastle upon Tyne – their unity and cohesion of the Catholic Church – everybody saying hello, so nice to see you. I feel I already belong and this is where I was always meant to be.

What made me actually decide to take the step and become a Catholic was three years ago when I was 17 and living in Hull I found a local Catholic Church and – I can't remember why – I decided to start going to church there. I saw about the Journey of Faith meetings they had at this church and I thought I would pop in and just get a taste of them.

Shortly after this I left Hull as I was accepted for a place to study criminology at the University of Newcastle. I wanted to continue the Journey of Faith in Newcastle but didn't actually get round to it until my second year when I found St Mary's Cathedral website and the RCIA link and made contact. Everything seemed to come together at that moment – I was thinking about continuing the RCIA and then I got online and saw the link and then in a couple of weeks the meetings were starting so I thought this is how it's supposed to be.

I think God has always been drawing me along my journey – at the difficult times and at the best times. One of my favourite stories is titled 'Footprints' and I have always felt the significance of this at the hardest point of my life when I have felt the strength and gentle touch of God's love and the presence of Jesus helping me through.

The Journey in Faith has been a great experience and I've met some really lovely people – all so welcoming and supportive.

I definitely think that the Journey in Faith will change my life – I see the Journey in Faith as a practice journey for how I'm going to be living my life from now on.

#### **6) Thomas is a teenager from Arundel and Brighton Diocese**

I have always been a Christian, just as the rest of my family. I grew up in North London in East Finchley; it was there, at All Saints' Anglo-Catholic Church, that I had my first experience of religion. I always remember being fascinated by the ceremony and reverence, the rich vestments and incense, yet I recall in those times, no faith of my own, no true sense of God, or feeling of Grace – I was only very young. But in fact I never truly knew God, until very recently.

I said my prayers, I went to church, I knew the Bible, I witnessed my father's conversion but through it all I never had faith. Every Sunday I was always torn between worship at my mother's local Anglican church, and my father's Catholic church, eventually I stopped church and religion altogether. I did continue to pray to

God, for what I am not quite sure, looking back I realise now how innocent I was. I had never grasped the true majesty and power of his infinite might, that knowledge that I now have I shall never forget.

It was my presence in Rome that led me first to realise that the Catholic Church was my true home. I have always been greatly intrigued, if not impressed by the beauty of the liturgy – the Latin prayers, the ecclesiastical ornament, the precious most beautiful art of the Church, the incense, the candles, the veneration of the most Blessed Sacrament and our beloved saints – yet it was only after that time in Rome that I realised what it was all for: For God, in his honour, for He is worthy of such honour. Solemn Vespers on the day of Saints Peter and Paul, at St Peter's Basilica, showed me not the splendour of the Church, but the splendour of God within that church and set me on the road to faith.

It is a thought most wonderful, that all across the world, millions of people sacrifice the same Mass, in thanks and praise to the same God, in unity. It is a thought most comforting, to see an institution that teaches what I find so easy to accept, that affirms my beliefs, that holds its teachings firm through the centuries, that dares to stand up to a secular society, that knows for sure the words it professes are truth as revealed by God. Again I witnessed this unity over the four days in which our Holy Father visited this country. I saw the Vicar of Christ, Christ represented on earth, the visible sign that keeps us together, that reminds us of Christ's mission to Peter, to fish for men, and he has fished me. Yet as well as a leader, I saw a man, a humble man, humble as we all should be, humbly kneeling before our Lord, alongside 80,000 others at Hyde Park, myself amongst them. Surely we felt the true presence of God amongst us.

Yet all of this worldly glory is just a glimmer of the glory that we may see in Christ, and it is that knowledge that leads me to be confirmed; to fulfil God's desire for me, for us, to live a life in which we may work towards that sight, to live and worship him alongside others who, all across the world, believe and do the same. It is one of my constant prayers, that one day, all will see beauty of the Catholic Church, and that all people will turn in unity to its head, Jesus Christ.

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