

RITE OF ELECTION 2014

Stories of Faith

Each year several thousand people choose to join the Catholic Church in England and Wales, but who are they and what motivates them?

In the pages that follow, you'll find a number of stories of faith that feature adults from the length and breadth of our countries. We hope that you enjoy reading them, and that they might encourage you to take a new step on your journey of faith.

TOM'S STORY

middlesbrough diocese



"My journey-in-faith began a few years ago, when I desired a better relationship with God. Sadly I spent a long time away from God and, whilst acknowledging his existence, treated Him like a chore which I would eventually get around to dealing with. Imagine treating our Creator in such a way!

I was baptised in the Church of England and did not actively attend church, but my grandparents and many of my friends are Catholics. One evening I joined my friend at Mass and my journey began.

Pope Francis' recent Apostolic Exhortation talks of the 'Joy of the Gospel'. At Mass that evening, my eyes were truly opened to this joy and I became hooked! I was gripped by the Gospel message and what it meant for each of us. The parish priest preached in a way which helped me to connect with Jesus and I started to adore the message that He came to give to us.

I soon found myself attending Mass each week and immersed myself in the life of the local parish. I started to attend formal meetings with fellow parishioners, and the parish priest, to grow in my faith and understand more about the Roman Catholic Church. I felt like I had found a home with God and with the Catholic faith.

For the first time in my life I was regularly attending church, reading the Bible and praying each day. God was no longer a chore but a complete joy!

In July 2013 I was received into St. Clare's Church in Middlesbrough, surrounded by parishioners, family and friends. I can honestly say it was one of the happiest days of my life and I haven't looked back.

Since becoming a Catholic I have continued to be active in my local church and recently became a Minister of the Word. It is a pleasure to be able to share God's Word with those at Mass and, as a young person, I hope it

encourages more young people to become involved in the life of their local church. In October I went on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land which deepened my faith and reaffirmed my commitment to building up Christ's justice and peace.

Reflecting on my journey, I know that God was patiently waiting for me to come to Him. He knows it can take us time to do so, but we can rest in the knowledge that He will 'celebrate and be glad' (Lk 15:31) when we approach Him and accept his love and mercy.

My journey-in-faith will continue for the rest of my life. Jesus is saying 'Come, follow me' (Mk 1:17) to each of us, so I urge you to answer that call. You won't be disappointed!"

OLIVER'S STORY

leeds diocese

"I suppose my journey began when I had just started secondary school (around 11 years old). I became fascinated with Catholicism because everyone else seemed to be a Protestant, and I liked the idea of being different! I remember I was given a rosary from a friend's mum and I tried to teach myself how to pray the rosary. At one point I actually found the prayers in Latin and used to pray every night (even though I had no idea if I was pronouncing the Latin correctly).

That phase probably lasted around a few months, and a little bit later on I left Catholicism behind and went to a local 'neocharismatic' church with a friend from school. I was quickly put off though by the sight of people 'speaking in tongues'. After that I never visited another church and moved away from Christianity entirely.

I was a militant atheist during the rest of my school years, until I went to university where I became more interested in God and explored different faiths before finding Judaism. When I started to read about Judaism I felt as though I had found what I was looking for. I spent hours and hours reading about its teachings, laws, the history of the Jewish people, and I even taught myself to read Hebrew. I spent three years studying, and regularly attended a synagogue before I finally converted to Reform Judaism. I was convinced that Judaism was going to become a huge part of my life, and at one point I actually considered the rabbinate.

About a year after my conversion, I began to feel distant from the faith that I had once defended and loved wholeheartedly. As I spent more and more time with my girlfriend's family (who are traditional Italian Catholics), I began to feel that I didn't have a real relationship with God at all; I prayed often, and lived a life of observance according to Jewish law, but I realised that my religious life revolved around dogma and rules, and that I never once considered helping other people. The Christian idea too of having a personal relationship with God made me feel uneasy, as I certainly was lacking a relationship with Him.

I drifted away from Judaism and began to become more and more relaxed, in terms of my observance of Jewish law, and began to question whether or not Judaism was the right path for me. I decided to revisit the faith of my grandparents (Christianity), and I quickly felt at ease with the emphasis on love; not love by living an incredibly regimented life, but a kind of love lived by devoting your life to God and to other people.

The more I thought about the message of Christianity, the more I realised that everything I had been looking for since I was young, was to be found in my own culture and upbringing: I had been searching in the wrong place. I quickly began to go to church and read about the lives of the saints, and I began to pray in a manner I had never done before (including when I was a practicing Jew): I began to pray as though I was having a conversation with another human being. I no longer obsessed about whether or not I said the correct phrase at the right time, but I simply began to speak. I realised, for the first time in my life, I was actually praying - not pretending, but actually praying.

Since that point my journey into Catholicism has blossomed. I'm fortunate enough to be surrounded by my fiancé's family (who are practicing Catholics) and I feel a great sense of ease in my life. I finally feel as though the journey I began when I was 11, has finally ended, and the real journey is just about to begin."

MICHELLE'S STORY

nottingham diocese



"My name is Michelle and I grew up in Nottingham and have two sisters. My Dad's family is from Ireland and are all Catholic and my Grandma and Grandad brought my father and his siblings up in a strong-willed Catholic family. It wasn't until my Dad followed his own path in life that he somewhat drifted away from the Church but not its beliefs. He

met my mum but she wasn't religious, although she does believe in God. When we were children we were never baptised along with the rest of our cousins and family members.

I went to a Church of England School, where as my sisters and most of my family went to Catholic schools. So the thought was always in the back of my Dad's mind which was good, as it showed that he didn't give up entirely on the Catholic Church. I think that life in general as a young man in the 1970's and 1980's had taken its toll on him!! I suppose in that way we were brought up as Catholics through how my Mum and Dad taught us in every day life.

We used to go to church with our grandad, who was very religious, and he taught us about the Catholic Faith. I remember he wore a cross around his neck and had holy pictures in his house. So we lived the Catholic life through school and because of grandad's influence and we continued it in our family life to an extent.

After I left home I just lived life and went to work in Spain, but didn't attend church. I went for funerals and things in accordance, but that was it. But I knew that I belonged in the Catholic Church, and so when I wanted to get married I went to the Cathedral to ask about making the arrangements. It was when Father asked me for my baptism certificate that I realised that I hadn't actually been baptised, and so couldn't get married in the Church. I still attended Mass on Saturday nights with my daughter and my partner, and always felt very welcome like we belonged there. The priest invited me to follow the RCIA to prepare for baptism, but life was so busy, it took me six years to actually sign up for it.

Six years later I was at Mass and the priest was preaching, and it was like he was speaking directly to me. I was having a tough time in everyday life, and it felt as if he knew what was going on, even though he was clearly speaking to a church full of people. So last September I started the RCIA course.

My fiancé isn't baptised either, and he didn't have a faith upbringing. He went to a faith school, but when he started going to Mass with me he also started to ask questions like, "Why does Father bring the smoke out at Mass?" I didn't know any different so didn't know what to say, so he decided to join the RCIA with me! It turns out that some of his relatives are Catholics too which I didn't know about before.

Then my two sisters also decided to join the RCIA as well, and one of my sisters' fiancé's followed suit, so we're all going! I also have a little girl who is nearly 8 and she's following the children's version of the Rite too, so all-in-all it's quite a family thing! I felt strongly that I really must do this for my little girl too.

Dad too has now come back to church and because his health isn't so good, he says that it makes him feel better when he goes to church.

I've found the RCIA very informative and everyone is at different stages. Most people following the RCIA have no Catholic background and everyone is really nice and helpful. The whole Church is lovely and all the priests answer any questions that you might have.

This past weekend I went to the Rite of the Election, which is an important step that happens in church ahead of becoming a Catholic at Easter. All the way through preparing to be baptised I've never felt frightened or nervous. It's something that I should have done a long time ago. I want what baptised Catholics have got, especially to get married in church, and if I die, to have a Catholic funeral. It's really important to me. We are starting to make preparations for our marriage fairly soon after Baptism, so it is all very exciting!!

The Catholic Faith is just what I believe. I don't like to question what is just there. I believe and that's that. I'd recommend the Catholic Faith and the RCIA to anyone."

KAREN'S STORY

shrewsbury diocese



"Hi, my name is Karen. I'm married with two young children and work from home. I was an only child until I was 17, and then two little brothers came along.

I didn't have any religious upbringing, and prayers and church were not part of my experience at all. There wasn't much of anything

faith wise, to be honest. I went to the occasional baptism, wedding and funeral, but didn't have any spiritual awareness.

I left home and got married, and it's only since September 2012 that I got involved with my local church, through attending an Alpha Course in my local Catholic Primary school. Attending the Course was a turning point, and I enjoyed it so much that I went to a second course and became a helper. I am now one of the organisers of the third alpha course that we've been running.

My husband is Catholic and we got married in a Catholic church. Our wedding was not a spiritual celebration, but going through the motions and I would like to revisit the ceremony to understand the religious content and meaning of it. The children got baptised, and go to the local Catholic primary, but we weren't really involved in parish life. Alpha was mentioned to me when my oldest son was about two and he's now 7. It wasn't that I didn't want to do the Course, but there just wasn't time to fit it in.

Another turning point came when I read the parish newsletter one day – which is given out through the school. In the newsletter I read a heading "PEACE –

removal of all anxiety, worry and envy". It spoke to me so much that I put it on our fridge. I also recall, on the occasions we did go to Mass, before I started Alpha, that I used to go to the priest for a blessing and I remember saying to my husband, that after the blessing, I used to feel really emotional in a good way.

Through Alpha I found that I had lots of questions and was doing lots of reading every day. It seemed just a natural progression to do RCIA. I've found it very interesting and now read the Bible every day taking the readings from the parish newsletter.

I really feel that we were meant to be in the parish that we're now in. We ended up in St Peter's and it feels like everything has come together and been mapped out for us. With the children going to Catholic school, and my son now preparing to make his First Holy Communion, the children have started asking questions. I feel it's my duty to be able to answer them and that I should have some input into their faith journey of faith as well.

So the decision to follow the RCIA has come about gradually over two years, and my faith has been growing. There has been a massive difference in me as an individual. Before I did Alpha I just found I was stressed all the time, and that life was chaotic, with me trying to fit everything in all the time. I had early mornings and late nights and was often short-tempered. I am now a lot calmer and just find that I'm thinking more about other people, not perhaps as selfish as I was. I really like trying to do good for others. This is the difference that knowing Jesus and being part of the Church has made to my life.

We feel really blessed that we are part of our parish. It's really close knit and there are lots of activities in the parish, so we've made new friends. It's really pleasant at Mass and we feel better for going. There's a good mix of different generations, and we're involved in a prayer group every morning in the school too, which is great.

I would recommend exploring becoming a Catholic to anyone!"

JAYNE'S STORY

shrewsbury diocese



"My conversion to Catholicism has been a very slow process. In my mid 20's, well over thirty years ago, I lost my faith; I even had the audacity to blame God for the death of my beloved Grandmother. Over time, my grief settled into resignation but I was left with a vast emptiness, this I mistook for the loss of my Grandmother. I told myself that I believed in nothing. That was the root of my problem, I felt adrift. But I had my husband and sons, my life

was full, so why did I feel a part of me was missing?

Many years later I was working in Liverpool and would pass by the entrance to the Metropolitan Cathedral. For months I felt an overwhelming urge to go inside but I resisted, after all I was not Catholic or even a tourist! Eventually I plucked up the courage to enter and attended a Mass, this became a regular occurrence when I was in the city. At that time my father, a life-long Catholic, was receiving treatment for cancer and I would occasionally accompany him to Saturday Evening Mass at St. Anne's RC, Nantwich. The Parish Priest, Father Warnock, would often visit my parents and we would have long talks about life and faith. His parting words on every occasion, delivered with a huge grin, 'You're a born Catholic Jayne, we'll get you yet.'

At long last I began to question that missing piece and the penny finally dropped, faith was meant to be a large part of my life, I just had to work out the details. Faith was back in my life but then I took a step in the wrong direction, hindsight is such a wonderful thing. I returned to the Anglican Church, but during the intervening 30 years the Anglican Church had moved on without me. Again I felt adrift, I thought about conversion but my Aunt, who is also my godmother, was insistent that becoming a Catholic would be a total rejection of my past. As a 'people pleaser' I ignored my own need and tried once again to fit in with the Anglican faith. Yet again I failed because my heart was now Catholic.

It took the death of my mother and her funeral Mass at our local Catholic Church, to confirm to me the absolute beauty of Catholicism. The newly arrived Parish Priest, Father Ravi, was welcoming and the whole community supportive. One of my sponsors, Agnes Cropper, gave me gentle encouragement and supported my faith journey step-by-step, fortunately she is a very gracious and patient person. My other sponsor Pauline is my oldest friend and she was equally patient in helping me to feel at ease with faith.

My mind made up I joined the RCIA group where I met like-minded people, one of which had taken a similarly long route to Catholicism, at last another 'slow burner' like myself.

Our parish priest, Father Ravi, is guiding us gently, his teaching like his Homilies, are full of wisdom and understanding. I also attended the Bishop's Day Retreat at Ellesmere Port on the 22nd February, which was most enlightening. The talk by the Bishop of Shrewsbury, Bishop Mark Davies, helped me recognise a potential failing in myself. A talk by Barbara Davies gave guidance on how to approach prayer in a less complicated manner. I gained much from that day and recognised many failings in myself, but I am sure that is all part of the process.

I now approach the Rite of Election with absolute certainty in faith and I give thanks for it every day. I know I have come home. My life is full of colour and joy.

My dream for the future would be for my husband, sons and grandchildren to join me in the Catholic Faith, watch this space.”

CONNIE SHARES

westminster diocese

“I came to Catholicism via the RCIA, despite being from a large Irish Catholic family. My mum left the decision on religion to us children to make. The desire to do something about my strong leanings towards Catholicism followed a dreadful personal experience. My fiancé was murdered in Australia whilst we were backpacking. Despite all the support from my family and friends I needed something stronger and deeper and the Church, thankfully, answered my call.”

Stories collated by the Bishops' Conference Home Mission Desk, March 2014