

Hitchhiking to Emmaus

By Cyndi Babecka

Part One: The Road to Emmaus

It's a funny title, I know, but after a good laugh I decided it was appropriate. My husband Bob called his testimony "Emmaus by way of Richmond." Bob worked hard to find his faith and he shared so much with me about our faith as he searched, that I really was hitchhiking.

Growing up, my family had no religion. I remember bedtime prayers and prayers at supper, but they faded away after a time. For about two years, I went to a Baptist church, but this was only because of Mr. Jim, a friendly Sunday school bus driver. He came around one day and asked my folks if he could take my brother and I to church on Sundays. My folks never went with us. They would wake up before we left and give each of us 50 cents for the collection plate. That was the extent of my religious upbringing.

From time to time I would find myself in a church, usually when someone I knew was getting married. I was always uncomfortable. It must have been obvious from my every action that I was a pretender; I didn't belong there. My prayer life usually consisted of prayers such as "if there is a God, I will get out of this house on time," or some such request. Consequently God's existence was proved or disproved frequently, usually based on what kind of day I was having. To clarify a point, I did believe in "God." I had adopted my father's viewpoint that God may have created everything, but then He moved on and got on with His life. He didn't get involved in everyday life. This was fine with me except on those mornings when I wasn't making it out of the house on time. This meant that I didn't have to do anything to please God, I simply had to please myself.

I was interested in spirituality. Sometimes I would spend time rattling around the religious section at Oxford Bookstore. I was curious, but I didn't quite know where to look. I wanted a religion that would give to me, but required nothing in return. The rebel in me didn't consider Christianity, partly because I felt that I didn't fit in, and also I felt that I was not good enough to be a Christian. My lifestyle was not a moral one. Once, while at Oxford, a man started talking with me. He told me about a book called *Science of Mind*. He told me it would teach me to travel out of body, heal spiritually, etc. Wow! This was the kind of stuff I wanted. Where do I sign up? I ordered the book (it was not in stock) and set about to read it; to learn the secrets of the universe – at least the fun parts. It was a very difficult book to read and I didn't make it through a quarter of the way. Oh well, so much for the mysteries of the universe.

Another foray into the spiritual occurred while I was in Houston for a week, training on an airline system for my job at American Express. My roommate was a very new age lady. One of the things she 'specialized' in was to lead people through past life regressions. I finally got up the nerve to ask her to take me on this journey. I lay on the bed. She led me through a relaxation exercise, then she had me picture a staircase. I walked down the staircase in my mind to a door. After describing the door and the doorknob, we 'discovered' that I was harboring angry feelings toward someone. I was amazed that she knew I still had a grudge against an ex-boyfriend. We put this anger in a bubble, and blew it away. After opening the door I then described the room. It

resembled a dark, dusty library in an old home. It was poorly lit and creepy. She told me to imagine a table in the center. There my spiritual guide was waiting. If I had met him on the street, I would have been terrified. He looked like the person in the painting, “The Scream,” except he had flaming (as in flames) red/orange hair. He looked downright demonic, and his name was Whisper, as in don’t tell. I never told anyone his name, or what he looked like. It seemed it was a secret I wasn’t supposed to tell. My roommate assured me that if I asked the question “are you of the light?” any spirit would have to answer truthfully, and an answer of yes meant that this being was a good spirit and not an evil one. Yeah, right. My roommate led me through past lives on this planet, other planets, and other dimensions. This was weird stuff, and I am convinced now that it was very dangerous stuff. I consider myself lucky, although I have no idea how much damage was actually done by inviting this being into my mind.

Once, I actually looked into Catholicism, briefly, and for all the wrong reasons. I started dating this guy who was ‘Catholic.’ Well, at least his family was Catholic. He would go to Mass with them when home for a visit. I thought, ‘gee, if I get serious about this guy, I need to know more about Catholicism.’ I called a Catholic couple I knew, and I asked to go to church with them. Of all things, the next Sunday was Easter. We went to Mass, and they tried to make me comfortable, but they didn’t explain anything about what was going on. With all the standing, sitting, kneeling, and responses, I didn’t feel at home. ‘Stranger in a strange land’ is the phrase that comes to mind. It was a very empty experience. They also lent me a couple of books. One was titled *Christ Among Us*. I later found this presented a very much less than orthodox view of Catholicism. It sounded nice, though, and it seemed to require very little of me. It wooed me to the point where I would have considered joining, if anyone had just reached out to me.

Let me say that by nature, I am very impulsive, and usually ready to go into something on the spur of the moment, just to try it out. This is probably obvious from my story so far. My enthusiasm for Catholicism lasted about as long as my relationship with this guy.

At the time I met Bob, I described myself as ‘spiritual.’ Bob, on the other hand, was agnostic. He was not a fence sitter, as some people think agnostics are, he simply refused to make a decision without hard evidence. One of the things that attracted me most about Bob was that he was a man of principle. He wasn’t just Pro-Life; he went out and did something about it. He thought very carefully about what he did, before he did it, and he never said anything he didn’t believe. We were married in a civil ceremony in his home.

We started looking into Buddhism and meditation during the first year we were married. We were looking for a moral framework for our lives. Just before Kaylynn’s birth (our first child) we became serious Buddhists. Now, there are as many different variations of Buddhism as there are countries where people practice it. Buddha was not a God. He was simply ‘awake.’ He saw everything clearly. Buddhism didn’t require that we worship a God, only that we try to “avoid evil, cultivate good, and purify our minds.” We didn’t go to a temple, or join any kind of Buddhist community. We simply stuck with the actual teachings of the Buddha (the Buddha never wrote anything himself, all that we have are things that people close to him wrote of his discourses, teachings, and ideas.) I strived to be a better person, to live the eightfold path – right thoughts, right actions, right occupation... There was no community with Buddhism; in fact the

opposite was true. It set us apart from others in many ways. We didn't really discuss it with people, but if asked, we would give a truthful answer. We had become vegetarians because of Buddhism, and that further set us apart. There was no sense of belonging anywhere, but with Bob.

When Kaylynn was a month old, we met a couple, now our best friends, Mike and Michelle Wolven. They were going down to abortion clinics to sidewalk counsel, offer help and choices to the women going there. Bob joined them down at the clinics, and he is still doing that today. They were Catholic, very seriously so. These two were beautiful witnesses to Christ. They are very outspoken about their faith and about abortion. They lived like Christians! One of the arguments I had, and I have heard from many others is that there are so many people that claim to be Christians, but are really hypocrites. This is the witness that they bore – that there are Christians out there that try to live their lives like Christ.

When Kaylynn was about five months old, our friend Debbie came to stay with us for a long weekend. Debbie has known Bob since he was a wet behind the ears engineering student at Rutgers. Debbie is also Catholic. We went with her to Mass that weekend to Saint Joseph's Catholic Church – which later became our parish. I remember there was a little girl receiving her first Communion. She was all dressed up in a pretty white dress and veil. She looked like an angel going up for Communion, and she positively glowed as she returned. I envied that glow.

Around Kaylynn's second birthday Mike and Michelle lent us a book by Norma McCorvy, *Won by Love*. This book told the story of her conversion from Roe in Roe v. Wade -- the court case that legalized abortion in the United States – and pro-choice abortion clinic worker, to pro-life Christian. I was really moved by her story, but I was hesitant to say anything to Bob about my feelings. Fortunately, after Bob finished the book, he told me that he was moved by her story, also. I told Bob that I wanted to “check out” Christianity. He was open to the idea, and suggested we start with the Catholic Church. We started going to church.

This sounds a lot easier than we made it. Bob had been impressed by a priest at St. Joseph's, Father Tom Hennessey. St. Joseph's was Mike and Michelle's parish, as well. We weren't ready to tell anyone we were looking into the church; we didn't want to do a lot of explaining, so we snuck into church. At this time, Michelle was pregnant with their fifth child, Micah. We knew they would never make it to an early Mass, so we did. In fact, I think I called Michelle and subtly pumped her for information as to which Mass they would be attending. We really didn't want to get caught. Anyway, we went, taking our two year old, Kaylynn and our eight month old, Debbie. There were no thunderbolts from heaven, just two squirming kids. We left Mass as fast as we could; Mike and Michelle were due at the next Mass.

Christmas came and went. We didn't go to Christmas Mass. We did keep going to Mass every Sunday, and we started praying together. I had been itching for another baby since the beginning of December. The original plan had been to wait until Debbie was a year old. Kaylynn and Debbie were only 16 months apart after all, but I got the bug. We decided to actively try for a new baby in January, but for December, we would just leave things up to fate. This would turn out to be a very fateful decision. After we started going to church, we met with Fr. Hennessey and he decided that Bob needed proof of a miracle. He talked to us about the incorrupt bodies of saints, Eucharist

miracles, and Our Lady of Guadeloupe – a Marian apparition in Mexico. Bob and I are avid book readers. We have more books than bookshelves and we never seem to say no to one another on the subject of books. So we did the logical thing, we bought books - books on the incorruptibles (saints), Eucharist miracles, and Our Lady of Guadeloupe. We bought books trying to prove the existence of God to Bob. We bought books on the Catholic Church. When we finally let people know about our search, we were given even more books. We were drowning in them.

I knew that Bob would be harder to convince than me. He was the engineer, the logical one, and the clear thinker. My decisions tended to come from the heart, his from the head. Bob had convinced me of the pro-life cause (I had been pro-choice). I knew he could convince me of Christ and the Catholic Church if he found evidence that was strong enough to convince him. Bob started reading and I started hitchhiking.

Well, I can't remember the exact order of the next few events, so bear with me. Bob and I were trying to pray the rosary daily. This is not as easy as you might think when you have two little bitty ones crawling all over you while you pray. If one of them wasn't crawling over me the other was nursing. I figured that Mary was a mother, and she would understand the unavoidable distraction children present. And speaking of unavoidable distractions, someone had a poopy diaper one night in mid-rosary. Bob got up to change her (I don't remember now which one, but they both went upstairs with Bob.) It was quiet for a few minutes, so I decided to pray for Bob. I prayed that he would find faith. The I said, "God, I believe that Jesus Christ is your son. I can only describe what happened next as a feeling of certainty. I had said the words and now I knew they were true. Then with tears in my eyes, I told God how sorry I was for how I had lived my life.

When Bob came back downstairs, I told him what had happened. He was not pleased. This is not what he had had in mind. His plan was to look at all the facts and together, come up with a rational decision. We have always been in step on everything we've done. Whatever we have done, we have done together. Our religious journey was supposed to be the same. When God gave me faith so abruptly and not by a logical conduit, but through the heart, it was as if I had stepped across a potentially uncrossable chasm. That night we stood looking at each other across this chasm and feeling very lonely. This was still very early in January.

Bob had looked into Christianity when he was younger. He had established some criteria, as any good engineer would, to decide if a faith was valid. Christianity hadn't lasted long because of the contradictions he found within the Bible. Now that we were looking into Christianity again, Bob needed something to keep him interested in the search when the going seemed impossible. God had used my conversion to raise the stakes. Now, for the sake of our marriage, he HAD to find faith.

That week, Bob started asking the hard questions. What were we going to do about the children if he never found faith? He would neither lie, nor keep silent about his beliefs (or lack thereof). We both knew that it would be impossible to raise children with a deep faith if the two people they trusted and respected most couldn't give them a united answer. Bob wouldn't let me baptize them. Because of this, I told Bob that I wouldn't have any more children unless he found faith. This wasn't a threat, or coercion. I couldn't force him to have faith. This was a very painful decision on my part. Bob and I have always wanted a large family. We had Kaylynn and Debbie and I wasn't going to

be allowed to raise them in the faith. I could do very little about that, but I could ensure that I wouldn't bring any more children into our lives only to put their immortal souls at risk. I was very firm on this point, as much as it hurt. Our family was in God's hands now. God was soon to show us just how true that was.

I missed my next period; I was pregnant, and by my calculations we conceived around the last week in December – before I found faith, and before I had decided on no more children. I don't remember how long it was before I realized that “Sprout” was a promise from God. (All of our children have had nicknames while they were in my womb. Kaylynn was Butterbean, Debbie was Peanut, and Joseph was Sprout. It is so much nicer than constantly referring to the baby as “the baby” or as “it.”) So, God had made a promise to me. Bob would be converted before this child was born in September. I didn't tell Bob or anyone else about this. At this point, it was just between God and I.

We kept my conversion secret, however we did tell Mike and Michelle that we were searching. They were excited for us. We talked with Father Hennessey, and we talked and we talked. Whenever we went to a Mass that Fr. Tom celebrated we would always end up there for an hour afterwards. We told others of our search as well, and the books began to pour in. Our usual habit was to go to bed pretty much together. Bob would entertain one of the girls downstairs while I nursed the other one to sleep, then he would bring up whoever was downstairs and she would be nursed, then we would all go to bed. This changed. When he brought up the girl from downstairs, he would go back down and read, and read. He didn't get a lot of sleep during this time.

People offered Bob everything they could think of during this time. Unfortunately most of the offers kind of ended with “...okay and from there you just have to make a leap of faith.” Well, Bob is not the leap of faith kind of guy. Bob would never just close his eyes and step out into a chasm. There had to be a bridge. Not one of those flimsy rope bridges like in all the adventure movies. No. This bridge had to be built on a solid foundation. It had to be structurally sound and engineered to withstand a lifetime of bombardment by the forces of man and society. No rain of doubt would rust the steel. No spiritual assault would crack the concrete. This bridge would have to last 'till eternity. Only this bridge could bring him across the chasm. Bob was hard at work building this bridge, and though he didn't realize it at the time, God was handing him each piece.

We only kept my conversion private for about two weeks. Really, we just kept quiet until we came to grips with it. Nevertheless, there was, between us a noticeable gap, and the constant question from Bob – what if? We talked about it off and on. We needed a plan, my engineer said. I asked him to concentrate on God and finding faith and not to spend his mental resources on what ifs. I didn't want to face the idea of him not finding faith, and I knew, because of Sprout that he would. I also didn't want him to have any way out. He would have to work without a safety net.

Time passed and I watched Bob grow in his knowledge of the church. Father Tom and I agreed that there was a purpose to his long search. What an excellent apologist he was going to make. There came the time when Bob became convinced that the Catholic Church was truly the church founded by Christ, built upon Peter, one, holy, and apostolic– that is, if there was a God.

Easter was approaching and Bob prayed he would celebrate Easter as a believer. We went through Holy Week holding our breaths. We went to church Holy Thursday

and Good Friday. When Mike Mueller (Bob's longtime friend from work and his future sponsor in the OCI program) told us how long the Vigil Mass would last, we decided not to go. It would be too much for the girls after two nights already spent in church, and we knew we would be going to Mass on Sunday also. I am so glad we didn't go to the vigil because the next year, when we came into the church, it made it that much more special, not knowing what to expect. Easter was a bit of a let down for Bob; he still had no faith.

After Easter, we started the OCI program. OCI, for those who don't know stands for Order of Christian Initiation. This was formerly known as the Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults (RCIA). Through the spring and summer, we would be in the inquiry phase. It was a time for those who were thinking about entering the Church to ask questions to see if they were really where they should be. We attended Mass, we went to our OCI classes, we asked questions, we juggled the girls (there was no baby-sitting during this time) and I grew more and more pregnant.

Each Sunday, as we sat in Mass, I watched with indescribable hunger as the rest of the church received the Eucharist. I wanted so much to dine at the Lord's table. I was going to be baptized and confirmed next Easter, with or without Bob. I prayed it would be with Bob.

I was almost six months pregnant with Sprout. Kaylynn was two and a half, and Debbie was a little over a year. Bob started a three-week rosary asking Our Lady for proof of God. He not only asked for proof, but he wanted Our Lady to deliver it in a miraculous way. I started praying my rosary along with him. Now things really started to happen. Fr. Hennessey had gone to Lourdes, and when he came back, he gave a talk at the church about his trip. He also had brought Bob back some papers about some cures that had been documented there. This was not enough for Bob, since he had no way to prove these first hand, and he couldn't cross-examine those involved to judge their competence and integrity. Fr. Hennessey told him about a doctor, who witnessed a cure as an agnostic, and he converted to Catholicism because of this. He had outstanding credentials. He would be perfect for Bob – only Fr. Hennessey couldn't remember his name. However, he knew someone who did know his name – Fr. Benedict Groeschel. Bob tried to contact Fr. Groeschel, but with no luck. Then we found out that he would be giving the benediction at the feast of Corpus Christi, here in Atlanta, the next Sunday. We went and when father Groeschel, was ready to sign books, Bob found from him the name of the doctor – Alexis Carrel.

Dr. Carrel had written a book *The Voyage to Lourdes*. Bob went on the Internet to find it, and discovered it was out of print. His first attempt at buying the book was a dead end, and when he went back on line to find it, he got two hits on the search engine he was using. This was a pretty narrow field of search. (By the way, the search he put in was the Doctors name, and the name of the book – all capitalized correctly. When he later put in the search without capitalizing, he got over 10 million hits – keep this in mind, it ties into the miracle.) The first site was the one that had told him the book was out of print; the second was a Marian Web site that only mentioned the book. What he found on this Web site was far more important than the book he was looking for. There was a conference coming up the weekend after next, on the Shroud of Turin.

We had already looked into the Shroud of Turin. Fr. Tom had turned Bob onto it. He had looked up scientific evidence on the Internet. I had suggested he go to Ga. State (my old stomping ground where I got my Geology Degree) and look up articles in their

scientific periodicals. We both read them and discussed their merits. It had been a long time since I had dug into scientific papers, and these were fascinating subjects – a possible medieval photographic device for producing a Shroud-like image, carbon dating, (I pointed Bob to one of my textbooks so he could learn the exact mechanics for the carbon dating process.), pollen grains from Europe and the middle east, and more. We had formulated theories on how it could have been forged back then when so much of the evidence was only ‘visible’ with technologies available today. We discussed and debated. We were working together on something for the first time since our schism. It felt good to be on the same team again. I felt good for me to be doing something other than cheerleading. It felt good to be so close to him again. To make a long story short, the Shroud had been a dead end. Bob had questions about the papers and no one to answer them. Most of the papers were from the ‘70’s and ‘80’s and the researchers had long since moved on to other jobs. They were nowhere to be found and believe me Bob tried. So, the Shroud had been shelved until now. Several of the researchers Bob had wanted to question were going to be there. Bob had been on many Web sites about the Shroud, but none of them had mentioned the conference. He wanted to go, but he was hesitant to leave me alone with two young children and one on the way. It would be a lot of work for me. As it turned out, my mom agreed to come and spend the weekend with me - problem solved.

In the mean time, Bob had found another source for the Book by Carrel (ya’ll remember him?) The book arrived in the mail and I called him at work to tell him. He was hoping this would prove the key, and he wouldn’t have to go to the conference after all. I read the book before he got home, and while it was a wonderful story, I knew it wasn’t the answer. Carrel had written it as if it were fiction and his character was renamed Dr. Lerrac (carrel spelled backwards). Carrel had never published this during his lifetime and it was found buried in some of his papers. Why, if this story were real was he so hesitant to tell the world? I told Bob when he got home, that he should read it, but it wasn’t the magic bullet. He would still have to go to the conference.

The conference was fast approaching. The researchers were going to be there, and Bob was still debating whether or not he was going to be there. It was time away from us, and time away from work. (Bob always takes two weeks off for the birth of each of our children. We were saving as much of his vacation as possible for Sprout.) He kept offering to stay home for my sake, but with Mom coming over, I assured him it was not only all right to go, but that I didn’t want him to leave any stone unturned.

I’ll make this part short (I promise). He came. He saw. He was conquered.

He got a chance not only to get his initial questions answered, but also to see much more evidence on the Shroud. Sunday when he reviewed all that he had seen and heard, he realized that he had seen evidence of the risen Christ.

He arrived home at about three-a.m. Monday morning. Upstairs in bed, I had been keeping an ear out for him. When the garage door opened with its hideous screaming screech, I headed downstairs. The first thing he said to me was “He is risen.” I was speechless. Was he pulling my leg? No, he was serious. With tears in my eyes and joy overflowing my heart we embraced for the first time on my side of the chasm.

All of this had happened within the three weeks of the rosary that he had started asking Mary to lead him to Christ. The last day of his three-week rosary ended with him

giving his first confession to Fr. Hennessey – the man who had helped us so much on this leg of our journey. That day was also the last day Fr. Hennessey was at our parish.

Let me quickly sum up Bob's miracle. While looking for Dr. Carrel's book, out of a possible 10 million Web sites, he got two; one of these was a Marian site that listed a Shroud of Turin conference not found on any Shroud site Bob had visited. This conference, by the way, was held at Mary Mother of the Church Abbey, in Richmond VA. Here he was presented with overwhelming scientific evidence that convinced him that there was no explanation for the Shroud of Turin other than the hand of God. Once again, Mary led one of her children to Christ, her Son.

Part Two: The Road to Easter

(You know, with all of these 'road' references, I feel like Bing Crosby and Bob Hope ought to be along. I wanted to call this section 'Hopping down the Bunny Trail, but Bob just gave me one of those looks.) Just a note here, this section is not so much chronological, as topical. This is all about the wealth of things that God has brought to me through my conversion and through the Church.

With both of us now firmly in the faith, we headed down the path to Easter. First thing we had to get out of the way was Bob's annulment. We talked about the issue. We were living in an adulterous relationship. Still married to his first wife, he had never been free to marry me in the eyes of God. What if his annulment never came through, how would we handle that? Would we never receive Communion, or would we make a greater sacrifice. Bob posed the question delicately, and I agreed wholeheartedly. We agreed to abstain from sex until his annulment came through and we could have our marriage convalidated in the church. Christ made the ultimate sacrifice for us; the least we could do was to make this sacrifice in order to receive him in the sacraments. Besides, what kind of an example would we be setting for our children. "Go ahead and receive Communion, kids, we would rather have sex than Christ." I don't think so! So, we abstained, and offered up our sacrifice to the Lord.

I think the Lord rewarded our sacrifice. He gave us the grace to resist temptation, and to be modest with one another. He also granted Bob's annulment quickly. We received the good news in August. Immediately we filled out the paperwork and Father Berny, our pastor, asked if there was any special date coming up soon. Our anniversary was September 24th. We wanted to do it then. It would be six years since our first date, and five years since our wedding. Sprout was due on September 23rd, but we expected him early. Debbie was 10 days early, we assumed because I was still nursing Kaylynn. Since I was nursing both Kaylynn and Debbie, I assumed Sprout would arrive early, too.

We asked Father Tom to come up and perform the convalidation. We invited Bob's brothers my folks, my brother, Mike and Michelle, Bob's sponsor Mike and Mike's wife Mary. We reserved the chapel at our church. Dispensation was required, and granted, because Bob was marrying a non-Catholic (me). We were all set except for one thing, no Sprout. We have been lucky enough to have all of our children at home. Debbie was born in the tub, and that's where we expected to have Sprout, also. As the date drew closer, I began joking that we were going through with this convalidation, if Father Tom had to be in the bathroom with us, working it in between contractions.

Joseph Albert Babecka was born at 4:16 p.m. on September 23rd. Just like his father, he seemed to be a stickler for details. I guess his attitude was “Hey, you said the 23rd, and here I am!” We called Father Tom. Another dispensation was granted so that we could hold the service at home. Thank you, God. This was perfect. As I said before, we were married the first time in our house, and all of our children were born there. How much more perfect could it get?

Father Tom showed up very late. He had forgotten to factor in extra time for going to the church to get the paperwork before he came to our house. In addition, the directions he had to our house were from his church in Thomaston, not from our church, St. Joseph’s. When he arrived, he told us that he was originally going to offer us Mass, along with the convalidation ceremony, but since it was so late, he didn’t know if we would still want this. We jumped at the chance. Everything else, and now Mass in our home. Wow! Now we just had to find some wine. A holdover from our Buddhist days, we don’t drink. Bob headed next door, to see if the neighbors had some. Halfway there he realized that he had a souvenir bottle from a wedding many years ago. Little did he know that that bottle was long packed away in the bonus room. Finally, Fr. Tom looked up on the hutch in our family room and asked, “Is that real wine up there?” He had spotted a souvenir bottle my Grandma had picked up at a winery that shared her last name. Whew! Before Mass, Father Tom gave Bob Confession, and he also gave him Communion during Mass. Bob received three sacraments that night. Bob was practically glowing.

You haven’t met my sponsor Kelly yet. She’s the wife of one of the OCI team members, Pete. Pete just came into the Church last year, with Kelly as his sponsor. We had met Pete as a result of a conversation we had with one of the other team members about Janet Smith’s tape “Contraception: Why not?” Pete was there, and he piped up that his wife Kelly was handing those tapes out all over the place. We got to talking with Pete and found they were nursing their daughter, Samantha, they believe in the family bed, Kelly was studying to be a La Leche League leader (La Leche League is a support group for nursing mothers), and she was studying to become a Lamaze instructor. They shared a lot of ideas and attitudes in common with us. Pete went home and told Kelly about us, and she wanted us all to get together. I was getting toward the end of my pregnancy at this time, and we were cutting back on our social engagements. She joked that Sprout would probably be three months old before we got together. Actually, he was six months old before our families got together. I had thought that Bob’s sponsor’s wife, Mary was going to be sponsoring me, but I misunderstood. Now it was a couple of weeks after we were supposed to have sponsors, and I was without. That morning, Pete came up to me before our OCI class and asked if I had a sponsor. He told us that Kelly had wanted to sponsor someone this year, but she hadn’t been assigned anyone. God’s timing, as always, was perfect, and I had a sponsor. Kelly and I hit it off really well. She had so much going with Samantha, then about 10 months old, her Lamaze and La Leche League training that I was very grateful that she wanted to take the time for me. She bought us an Advent wreath for our first Advent as Christians. We would talk every week or so, and of course, she was there for all my rites. We both signed up for FAMILIA – Family Life In America. This is a study group for women with young children. Kelly was really, really there with me every step of the way, and I will always be grateful to her.

November brought us to the Rite of Acceptance and Welcome. Here we knocked on the door to the church and asked to be accepted as candidates and catechumenes. We waited in the narthex of the church with our OCI companions. Mass started and we waited for the knock. What a startling sound, even though we knew it was coming. The church was asked if they would accept us and we were officially invited in. Kelly led me to the front of the church. I found out that the catechumenes were always at the front of the church for these Rites, and Bob, as a candidate (someone already baptized) was standing in the aisle with his sponsor. Kelly signed my forehead, my ears, my eyes, my mouth, my shoulders, my heart and my hands with the cross. She then presented me with a wooden cross, that I was to wear every week to show that I was a catechumen. She took her soon to be familiar position behind me with her hand on my right shoulder. This was the first of many Rites leading to Easter. At this time, we hardly knew each other, yet as we stood face to face in front of the church; she took my hands, in case I needed support. Afterwards, she told me she hoped that was okay; it just seemed to be the thing to do. Wow! She literally reached out and drew me close to her.

Our next rite was the Rite of Sending. Here the catechumenes are sent to the Rite of Election with all the other catechumenes in the archdiocese. Kelly had to get up in front of the church and tell why she thought I was ready to come into the church. I want to share with you her words, because they touched me deeply:

“My name is Kelly Warner. I am sponsoring Cyndi Babecka. Cyndi has taken her Catholic formation extremely seriously. She and her husband, Bob, have established a strong Catholic household and are raising their children in the faith. Cyndi has re-prioritized her life around God and evidences a deep spiritual commitment to the Catholic Faith. I believe she will make an excellent Catholic. Cyndi Babecka is ready to sign the Book of the Elect.”

I signed the Book of the Elect, which would be read at the Rite of Election. From then on, it would be placed on the altar until Easter, when we elect came into full communion with the Church.

The Rite of Election found us in the Atlanta Symphony Hall. We were there with half of the Archdiocese. There were too many of us; we had to be elected in two shifts. If anyone thinks that the Catholic Church is stagnant, they should experience the sight of Atlanta Symphony Hall filled with people trying to get into the Church. This whole Rite was done with as much ceremony as could be mustered. There was a grand procession, beautiful singing, and an address by the Archbishop. The candidates were asked to stand up one by one as their names were called. They were seated in the back rows of the ground floor, and in the two balcony sections. I turned from where I was in the second row, and watched as my husband stood up. Then, they called out the catechumen. We were to go up onstage as our name was called. Kelly was in her familiar spot behind me. We were squeezed in like sardines, Kelly, Joseph, and myself. There were so many of us, that the Archbishop had to be moved over a bit to accommodate us. It was a very moving ceremony.

During Lent we were asked to go on a retreat with our OCI class. It was to be an all day retreat ending with the vigil Mass that evening. Michelle was going to keep the girls, and Joseph would be coming with us. I was really looking forward to this retreat.

Early in the week, I got a call from one of the team members helping to coordinate the retreat. She wanted to make sure I had a baby-sitter. I assured her I had, and the girls were all taken care of. What about Joseph, she asked. He has to come with us, I replied. (Let me digress here. I'm a breastfeeding Mom. Joseph is a breastfed baby. At this time he was only six months old, and not at all on solid food. I was it, his only food source. It's sort of difficult to find a baby-sitter who can stand in for me. While my children are this young, they are my nearly constant companions. He was at all the rites with me and he would be at the Easter vigil with me. Even if there had been some way to leave him behind, I would have been so engorged from not nursing all day that I would have been useless long before the retreat was ended. 'Nuff said.) I was told that the retreat center had 'no facilities for children.' What facilities? I joked that my diaper bag and I are all the facilities he needs. Well, if we couldn't go, we couldn't go. This situation really upset a lot of people. Me, I was just disappointed, not angry. Bob called the retreat center to clear things up. They wouldn't say I *couldn't* bring Joseph, (that opens the door for all sorts of nasty discrimination lawsuits), they just said that if I were to bring him, that I would need to keep him out of sight from the other retreat group that was going to be there, and I couldn't eat lunch in the dining room. They didn't want the other folks at the retreat to wonder why they couldn't bring their kids. Okay, I could respect that. I would have Bob, and Mike Wolven there to help me out with Joseph. (Mike had never been confirmed in the church, and his Confirmation class was also to be on the retreat with us.) Michelle would keep the girls and we would all meet up again at the vigil Mass.

Murphy has a saying about these things...

Michele called me the night before the retreat. Andrew was running a fever. He was a pretty sick little guy and she wouldn't be able to keep the girls. Our options were for Bob to go by himself, or for him to stay home with the girls, while I went with Joseph. At this point I went into waffling mode, but Saturday morning when we got up, I asked if he minded if I go. Bob's answer of course was for me to go. I went. I would still have Mike to help me out with Joseph. After all, if you can't pawn a kid off on his Godfather, whom can you pawn him off on?

One of the activities we did touched me deeply. This is what the activity asked

- Concrete ways you have opened yourselves to God as you have walked this spiritual journey of conversion of the past several months.
- Areas in your life where you still feel that you are holding out, that is, those barriers in your life where you do not yet respond fully and freely to the call of God.

Create a prayer petition that reflects a barrier named. Fill it into this format:
"Loving God, I bring to you my _____"

I ask you to bless me with _____
that I might be more open.

So, this is what I was dealing with. I started off pretty vague. I honestly couldn't think of any place that I was consciously holding myself back from God. Then I thought about my calling. I had always asked God what his calling was to me. Sometimes I felt as if I was hiding behind my motherhood. After all, I had friends, even another mother,

who were being arrested down at the abortion mills. What was I doing? They were out on the front lines, and where was I? I was at home safely with my children. Now don't get me wrong, Bob would never let me go down to the clinics to counsel. It got rough down there. The escorts for the abortion mills would push and shove and generally take little potshots where they could. Bob wanted none of this for me. None the less, I always felt there must be something nobler that God wanted me to do. Please don't misunderstand me. I am a great believer in the importance of motherhood. It is all I have ever wanted to be since I was a little girl.

I was all alone in the retreat room. Joseph was sleeping, and everyone else had taken off to find a nice place to be alone with God. I got down on my knees and prayed. Then, more importantly, I listened. I started writing as fast as my pen would take me. The spiritual exercise was given to us on a half piece of 8 ½ by 11 paper. This is what I crammed on the front and back of it:

I prayed to God today to give me courage to accept his calling for me. I felt as if I had been hiding behind motherhood by saying it is enough for me to raise tomorrow's saints.

Then I changed my prayer to ask God that if motherhood were my only calling or ministry that I have the courage to accept that. That I need not be afraid to be just a mother and to show others, by my example, what a gift from God and a blessed responsibility it was to be a mother.

A warm feeling poured over me – a warm light washed down over me from my head down. THIS was the prayer I was needing to say. THIS is my place. By showing the world who a mother is and how she loves her children, I am an example first of our Blessed Mother and her love for us and second by that example, Mary's example, an example of God's love for us.

Mary said yes and I have now said yes too... Lord, I bring to you my motherhood. I ask you to bless me with the grace necessary to be an example to the world of saying yes to you and like Mary help me also to point the way to Jesus, Your Son, Our Savior. Mary spent her early years as a mother and wife – nothing more. She spent her later years, after her son had left the nest, pointing the world toward Jesus. Help me be like Mary, Lord, and point the world to your Son later and raise your children now. Amen.

Of course I shortened this a bit when I went up in front of the group to read my prayer. Months earlier when we had been discussing Confirmation names, I had chosen St. Anne, Mary's mother. She raised Mary to say yes to God. She raised a saint, the queen of saints. I wanted to raise my children to say yes to God. I wanted to raise tomorrow's saints. Now God was telling me that this is also what he wanted from me. They say that the hardest part of solving any problem is to ask the right question. 'Nuff said.

Hang on just a little bit longer, it's almost Easter.

With Easter fast approaching, I called Bob one day at work to see if he wanted to invite his friend Debbie down for Easter and his Confirmation. I knew she would like to be here to see Bob come into the church. She came. My baby-sitter, Rosemary, had already agreed to help out at the Easter Vigil. Because Easter came so late this year, well after daylight savings time, the vigil wasn't to start until 9 p.m. This was going to be rough with the kids, but it was important for us that they be there. This long journey to Rome had been a family affair.

That night, we arrived at the church and Debbie and Rosemary took the girls. Bob and I took Joseph to where they were rounding us up. Bob was dressed in a shirt and tie; I was dressed in shorts, T-shirt, flip-flops, and probably the ugliest brown robe ever to be worn to an Easter vigil. Well at least I wasn't the only one so dressed. This was standard issue for all that were to be baptized. My change of clothes was securely tucked away in the ladies room of the church. When it was time, we headed for the back of the rectory where they had built the bonfire. For some reason Bob and Mike, his sponsor, left us behind and I was torn between wanting to catch up with Bob, (and Joseph) and not wanting to lose my sponsor in the crowd. I opted for my sponsor. Pete, Kelly, Samantha, and I were at the back of the crowd and could see nothing that happened with the blessing of the fire, and we could hear only a little. Then they lit the paschal candle, and we followed it back to the dark church. Somehow we managed to hook back up with Bob and Mike, then with Debbie, Rosemary and the girls. Debbie saw me and decided she didn't want Mommy to get baptized. This is my little heretic. Earlier in the week Kaylynn told her that Jesus rose from the dead, and Debbie stated emphatically that He did not! Now here she was at the Easter Vigil crying because she didn't want me to be baptized.

We got into the church and the service started. It was really beautiful to see the church lit only by the candles of the worshipers. As we walked up the aisle to the baptismal font, Joseph nodded off to sleep in his car seat basket. One down. I stood nervously excited waiting for my turn to be baptized. Because we had not gone to the vigil last year, all of this was new to me. Kelly was, of course, there in her usual position. She had bought two new white towels for the occasion. After we used them for drying me off coming out of the font, she would keep one, and I would keep one. She is always so thoughtful. The baptizing started. The children went first, then one family, the father and three children, were baptized, and then it was my turn. As Jesus had gone down into the waters, so did I. One step at a time I descend into our baptismal font. The warm water enveloped me to about mid thigh, or so, then I knelt. Kelly was on the outside of the font with her hand always on my right shoulder. Father Berny raised the shell above my head and poured water on me. "I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen." Amen. Kelly's hand was on my shoulder, Bob looked on lovingly and proudly from the crowd, and God smiled down on me. I had a bright new soul.

Stand up, out of the water, light my baptismal candle, and off to the restroom to change. All the little girls were changing into their beautiful first Communion dresses. I guess I was too. I had a new white dress for the occasion. I came out again in time to see Bob get some sort of blessing along with the others who were just receiving Confirmation. After going back to our seats we were called up for Confirmation. Father Berny confirmed us with the oil, and then the other priests welcomed us into the church.

Then it was time to dress the altar. The newly baptized were responsible for dressing the altar before the liturgy of the Eucharist. I was to light the candles. I had kept my baptismal candle lit after all the candles had been blown out so that we could light the candles on the altar with the Paschal flame.

Finally, it was time for First Communion. I had been waiting well over a year for this, and here it was—my first reception of the body and blood, soul and divinity of our Lord, Jesus Christ. It was so late, and so much had happened that night that I really couldn't appreciate Communion as I wished I could have. It was the next Sunday at Mass when I cried for the gift I had been given.

As I'm writing this, I'm thinking of the overwhelming number of blessings God has sent to Bob and I since our conversions. It's as if He had been saving up all the blessings that we wouldn't accept for all these years, and now that we are open to Him, He was making up for lost time.

The night of the vigil, Kelly had made some pictures. She presented them to me in a little scrapbook along with the testimony she had given on my behalf at the rite of Sending, and her words of gratitude for letting her share my journey with her. Thank you, Kelly, for walking with me. You are one of the many blessings God has sent to me. I want to send thanks and prayers to all those who touched me on my trip. Many have been mentioned in my story, many have not. I thank them all. I especially thank Bob, my constant companion on this trip, who has always challenged me to be just a little bit better than I am in every way. With him by my side, I know my faith will never stagnate. Finally, I want to thank God – the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Faith truly is a gift. Without his gift, there can be no life. I hope to spend the rest of my days here on earth showing my gratitude for this gift.

May God bless you,

Cyndi Babecka