

Coming home again

I am always fascinated by faith conversion stories. The stories of St. Paul's wake up call when we was thrown from his horse to Thomas Merton's searching story as outlined in "The Seven Story Mountain." Their conversion stories are varied and unique. People often feel a vacuum in their lives. Others are led through the example of Catholics whose faith and dedication gently invite them to explore some more.

Some time ago, I read the story of how the famous New Orleans native and vampire queen writer, Ann Rice returned to her childhood faith. I was curious as to how a writer who wrote about the struggle between good and evil discovered what was missing in her life. Her book, "Called Out of Darkness: a spiritual confession," reflects her return journey to her Catholic faith.

She grew up in a pre-Vatican II church filled with devotions, novenas and Latin. Her early school years were filled with the sights, sounds, smells of saints and catechisms. The trappings, rituals, hymns, vestments, flickering candelabras, Stations of the Cross, and Latin Benediction hymns appealed to her senses.

During her college years her "faith began to crack apart." She rubbed shoulders with people who weren't Catholic and "they negotiated their moral decisions with considerable thought but without the guidance, it seemed, of any established church." She began to wrestle with the idea that her "upbringing condemned her to be a Catholic forever, no matter what her heart and conscience hold her was true;" a heart that was telling her to "leave the church, to explore."

She quit the church for thirty-eight years. Outside the church, she did not find a "sinkhole of depravity." Instead, she found "articulate people who made complex and refined distinctions about how to be a good human being."

On her return to New Orleans, she found herself buying up statues and property that had the stamps of Catholicism embedded in them. She didn't know why she was doing this. Her mind continued to suggest to her, "You can't go back to God. Why do you dream of this? You know too much, you've seen too much, you just can't believe all the social things these people obviously believe. Besides, you know there is no God. The world's meaningless. People have to provide the meaning. You've been writing about this for thirty years."

Somehow, she felt drawn to journeys and pilgrimages – to Rome, Assisi, Holy Land, France, and Buena Aires. She was looking for religious collectables, not knowing why. She felt she was being pursued by the Hound of Heaven.

Faith returned on December 6, 1998 when she began to surrender. "In the moment of surrender, I let go of all the theological or social questions which had kept me from Him for countless years. I simply let them go. There was the sense, profound and wordless, that if He knew everything, I did not have to know everything, and that, in seeking to know everything, I'd been, all of my life, missing the entire point."

She came back to a church that had changed from Latin to vernacular and she discovered that those who had remained Catholic enjoyed being Catholic still. She began to read and study scripture and devour scripture commentaries until she finally discovered how the "incarnation had become the central and sustaining mystery" of her life.

The challenge of the Sermon on the Mount caught hold of her. "Something came clear to me that had never been clear before. Loving our neighbors and our enemies is perhaps the hardest thing that Christ demands. It's almost impossible to love one's neighbors and enemies. It's almost impossible to feel that degree of total giving to other human beings. To practice the daily love of neighbor and enemy calls into question one's smallest and greatest competitive feelings, one's common angry reactions to slight both great and small. In sum, the will to love all human beings must pervade every thought, word, and deed. One has to love the rude salesclerk, and the foreign enemy of one's country; one has to love those who are 'patently wrong' in their judgments of us...one has to love the employee who steals from us, and the murdered excoriated on national television."

She concludes by saying that "it takes immense courage to remain in a church where one is surrounded by hostile voices; and yet, we must remain in our churches and we must answer hostility with meekness, with gentleness, or simply not answer it at all!"

A few weeks after reading Ann Rice's book, I noticed a recent, stark statement in her blog. It simply said that she had rejected Christianity and the Catholic faith again. I'm still wondering!