

Introduction**

This will be the ninth year that I have been working in full-time Catholic ministry. It's been almost a decade since I called my parents and told them that I was quitting my promising career in accounting so that I could live on half that salary as a local youth minister. Every parent's dream, right? I'll never forget that conversation, mainly because my parents were furious, but also because I lied about the pay cut I was taking in an attempt to soften the blow. I was going from making somewhere in the fifty thousand dollar range to making twenty-nine thousand in my ministry job. I told my dad that it was thirty-one thousand because I thought the thirties sounded better. (Don't worry; I confessed the lie to a priest pretty quickly and to my dad years later.)

Despite the rocky start to my work in the Church, it's since been an incredible nine years. I have worked in youth ministry, as a FOCUS missionary, and in women's ministry with ENDOW and Walking with Purpose. I have seen hundreds of people of all ages discover what it means to be Catholic. I have seen what happens when the light bulb of true faith comes on and people realize they can have a living relationship with God. I have seen men and women enter religious life who give me great hope for the next fifty years of Catholicism. Revival is happening everywhere, and it is the honor of my life to witness it unfold.

Mixed with these joys, however, are some deep sorrows. If you have ever read the statistics on Catholic Church attrition, you know they aren't good. Millions of men and women have left the Church for a myriad of other belief systems, or none at all. I have met fallen-away Catholics so often that I can pick them out by their

response when I tell them what I do. I can almost tell a version of their story before they begin to tell it to me. I know them not only because I have sat with so many of them but also because I was one of them. Years before I made that phone call to my parents, I had one foot out of the Catholic Church and the other was soon to follow. And like the stories of so many disillusioned Catholics that I have heard, my story too starts with the simple phrase “I was raised Catholic . . .”

My parents are from large Catholic families, and since I am from south Louisiana, I honestly grew up thinking that everyone had fifty cousins, celebrated Mardi Gras, owned a boat, and was Catholic. As a kid, Catholicism showed up in every part of my life because Catholicism permeated our Cajun culture. I attended an above-average Catholic elementary school, we prayed the Rosary often as a family, and my parents talked about God on more than just Sundays. I had a positive relationship with religion and naturally gravitated toward faith until other things became more important.

As I went into middle school, my religiosity started to take a back seat to my social life, and I noticed the same pattern in my friends. Who wants to worry about “God” and “prayer” when boys and friend drama require so much attention? This could have been the end of the road for me and any sort of meaningful Christianity, as it was for many of my classmates, if it weren’t for my brother making his Confirmation. He experienced a deep conversion on his Confirmation retreat, and I saw for the first time in my life what it looks like when a young person gives his life to Jesus. I learned through my brother that Catholicism is more than just a religion: it is a relationship with God. I learned that Jesus loved me and wanted me to be good, so that is exactly what I decided to do. I joined my church youth group, where I met faith-filled adult leaders whose lives were shining examples of Christianity lived out. I prayed, read scripture, joined a Bible study, and went to daily Mass at my high school. Over time, I became known as the “good Christian girl,” and I was good at being good—until I wasn’t.

During my junior year, I got my first boyfriend, and within a year the faith that I thought was so strong had crumbled as the

glamour of secular culture beckoned and life got complicated. Leaving high school, I was slightly more “religious” than anyone else, and three shifts occurred in my thinking.

The first shift came from the effects of giving in to temptation. As a Catholic, I knew about forgiveness and the love of God, but I learned that only after I learned to follow the rules. I learned all the dos and don’ts of morality and, oh yeah, Jesus loves you. But what about when I no longer followed the rules? What about the times that I had given into temptation and become a hypocrite? Was I a Christian then? Was I worthy of standing in front of the Almighty? As my choices changed, I started to feel like a liar—unworthy of God’s goodness and the “good Christian girl” reputation I had earned.

The second major shift occurred when the lifestyles of those I loved most started to clash with the seemingly antiquated teachings of the Church. I was in theater, and many of my male friends were gay. I worried what the Church said about them because, in my opinion, they were pretty awesome. And what about my promiscuous friends? They didn’t seem to be living the gloom and doom promised to us in religion class. In my daily experience, it seemed that one could pretty easily step out of the bounds of Catholic Church teaching and not end up in ruins.

The last major shift was that faith no longer seemed relevant in my everyday life. For years, my Catholic faith was important, but I never developed an integrated, Catholic understanding of reality. There was God and what he wanted from me on one side, while my dreams of success, friendship, and lifestyle were on the other. They rarely mixed. Walking into my freshman year at Louisiana State University (LSU), I chose to give more attention to my idea of happiness, and I put anything having to do with religion on the back burner.

For the next three years, my life looked like that of your average state school college student. I joined a sorority, studied just enough to get decent grades and not screw up my future, and partied a few times a week (not too much to get a reputation, but just enough to be known as “fun”). I spent most Sundays, especially during football season, hungover on the couch somewhat pleased with

my weekend but vaguely aware that I was far from the woman I was meant to be. I went to church about half the time and only to appease the demands of my background as the embers of faith in my heart continued to cool.

During the summer of my junior year, I was getting ready to meet my friends at the bar for a low-key night of drinks. I was twenty-one, so I wasn't necessarily doing anything wrong, but something felt different. As I stood in front of the mirror, doing my makeup, my heart sank. I did not want to go. I stared at myself and saw that I was exhausted by my life of self-indulgence. I no longer had the naive spark of joy I'd once had. Over the past three years, in my efforts to live a "normal" American college lifestyle, free from the confines of religion, I had done things that now made me wince. This freedom I sought had come at the price of my self-respect. My lack of confidence was, in many ways, an honest assessment of my lifestyle. I didn't like what my life was starting to look like, and I knew I would not achieve my dreams of happiness, success, and true love by sipping a Crown and Coke at the local LSU dive bar.

I knew that I had been much happier when I was living my life as a Christian, but the problem was that I no longer really believed in God. I behaved as though there were no God, and in the end, that behavior became my belief. I decided that night that something had to change, and I would start that change by exploring what it would look like to live the life of an atheist.

The next week, I went to Barnes & Noble to purchase *The God Delusion* by Richard Dawkins. I knew that he was brilliant, and I expected to find the answer I was looking for in the pages of his book. I suspected that a life of moral atheism would be the life for me and that my still-believing family would have to respect that.

I was wrong.

I read the book from cover to cover, and despite my hopes, I found myself right back on the edge of belief—at the beginning of the road I had walked years ago. Reading the book, I realized that I didn't fit into any of the categories of people who "needed" religion. I didn't look to religion for comfort or for a reason to behave, and I wasn't uncomfortable with the idea that there may be nothing after

death. I was much more interested in finding the truth, whether I was comfortable with that truth or not.

By the end of the book, I finally had to admit that I am just not smart enough to disprove the consensus of all of human history. Dawkins mentioned that every group of people in history has believed in a creator. People far more accomplished and virtuous than I knew God who existed before creation. What did I, with my 3.2 GPA at a state school, have to say to them? How could I unequivocally disprove what many of them had proven? They may have had access to less information than I, but these philosophers, theologians, and saints blew me out of the water when it came to wisdom and virtue. If they could give their lives to God, then I could, at the very least, say a prayer. I sincerely looked at the ceiling and said, “Lord, I don’t know if you are real, but I am jumping on your team, and you better prove yourself to me.” And over the next few years, he did just that.

The problem was, I had no idea just how I was going to go about “jumping on God’s team.” I mean, how does one even begin to shift belief and attitude and behavior? I had a lot of work to do, and I wasn’t sure how to bring my childhood faith into my young adult life. I thought of my Christian sorority sisters. I was friendly with them but had always politely turned down their consistent invitations to their nondenominational church. With nowhere else to go, I decided I would start there. I had spent little time in the Protestant church, but I didn’t like the Catholic church on campus, and I knew that I wouldn’t be alone if I went with my sorority sisters.

I was blown away by what I experienced the first night I attended a nondenominational worship service. Walking in, I was welcomed by a stranger’s warm smile, and everyone seemed friendly and eager for the service to begin—a far cry from the gloom of obligation present on the faces of most Catholic college students of the same age. I noticed a countdown approaching zero on the projector screen above the stage. I took my seat with hesitant excitement as the countdown finished and the band appeared on stage. They sang their opening praise and worship, and I watched the millennial congregants raise their hands in prayer. The music was

good, really good. I had heard this kind of music at Catholic youth conferences but never during a regular Sunday service.

The praise and worship ended and out walked the thirty-something-year-old pastor in his jeans. You know the type—many are celebrities now—but at this time, I had never seen such an approachable pastor. And what followed, of course, was the part of the service that hooked me. The preacher opened the scriptures and brought them to life. I had heard wonderful preachers before, but I had never seen anyone preach with such knowledge of his subject, understanding of how to apply it to our lives, and passion for Jesus Christ. Sitting in my seat that night, I knew there was an entire world of Christianity that I had missed, and I wanted more. As the very cool band finished their closing song, I felt hope that I hadn't felt in years. I got in my car that night knowing that next week, I would be back. And I was.

Over the next year, I attended church every week. I even started lifting my hands unapologetically in worship. I finally realized that Jesus didn't want me if I was good enough; I could never be good enough. He wanted me as the train wreck that I was, and his love would restore me. I fell in love with Christianity, and with Jesus Christ. My behavior outside of church, however, still often resembled my old life. I learned that it is easier to transform a heart than it is to transform a habit, but God was there in the midst of it. He had a plan, and that plan showed up in my life as a fiery, five-foot-tall Baptist girl named Andrea.

I met Andrea while I was working at the LSU Museum of Art, a place that required me to attempt the impossible task of being quiet at work. Andrea showed up with the only other animated personality in the place, and we became friends. I learned that her husband was the lead music pastor at the church I was attending. She was also chasing after holiness in a tenacious and frankly annoying way. She challenged me to clean up my behavior outside of Sunday church services with an audacity that I would have allowed from very few people, but she had the moral authority to do it. I remember a particular argument we had about drinking:

“Mallory, you can't get drunk.”

“Andrea, I’m a Catholic from south Louisiana—it’s what we do; you just don’t understand.”

After a bit of back and forth, the conversation ended. She won it fair and square a week later, when I woke up with a splitting headache knowing that the Lord wanted more for me.

During my time at the nondenominational church, through my close friendship with Andrea, the Lord transformed my life. That transformation was solidified forever when I went on a mission trip to Prague. I spent five weeks in that beautiful, once Catholic, and now primarily atheist city, learning how to pray daily and share my faith at a level that I had never before experienced. It was during my daily quiet times with the scriptures and in the moments when I just wanted to quit and go sightseeing that the Lord finally sealed my heart for good. I was his, not perfect but not going anywhere ever again. I had found the love of my life. I had found the truth, the purpose, the joy, and the meaning for which I had longed. I knew that I had to be about God and his Church no matter what, and I had found it outside of the folds of Catholicism.

For three years, I stayed away from the Catholic Church as my bitterness toward the faith of my youth grew. How had I been in Catholic schools for twelve years but never received a comprehensive, Gospel-centered worldview? As Jeff Cavins, a well-known Catholic Bible teacher would say, I received “a pile of Catholicism.” While my pile made more sense than those of my far less catechized peers, it still wasn’t enough. In the first twenty years of my life, I had only heard preaching with deep conviction a handful of times, and I had heard well-rehearsed, pleasant worship music much less than that. I knew only ten or so Catholic adults in my life who had made Jesus the center of their lives. These ten men and women had a profound effect on me, but most of the adults I knew attended Mass, and that was it. The other parts of their lives were spent in pursuit of material pleasures and making moral compromises, just as mine had been. It was as if when I spoke to my Catholic friends, most of whom were no longer practicing, we weren’t even talking about the same God or even the same Christianity. Everything in me wanted to live a life centered on the Gospel of Jesus Christ—and nothing about that desire said “Catholic” to me.

This is how I felt as a twenty-four-year-old. I didn't want to be Catholic. I had graduated college, started a job in Tampa, and gotten involved with a Protestant church there. I was still loving being a non-Catholic Christian, and yet there was something, a remnant in my heart causing me to question if I could really leave Catholicism forever. Call it family ties or good old Catholic guilt, but in the end, I know it was the working of the Holy Spirit. Out of nowhere, on a random weeknight, I found myself pulling into my local Catholic church to attend eucharistic adoration.

I sat there in the pew that night completely familiar with what I hadn't seen in years. I had been to adoration many times in my life, but not since I stopped doing the Catholic thing. That evening, the Lord worked his magic. The priest was friendly and joyful. He seemed genuinely holy, something that I saw as rare at the time. As I stared at the Eucharist that night, I knew in my heart what I had known forever. Before me was the Jesus with whom I had fallen so in love. It was him. I remembered the teachings that Eucharist is the Body, Blood, Soul, and Divinity of Jesus Christ, and I believed it.

In my car that night I pleaded, "Lord, what do you want from me? I would go anywhere for you, but I can't be Protestant and Catholic; I have to choose." I know that God doesn't always answer prayers audibly, but that night, I heard him loud and clear: "I have raised you in this Church. Many of my people no longer know me. I have given you a mission field. Why are you searching for another one?" In that instant, out of obedience, I decided that I would stay and make my home in the Catholic Church.

After that night, I mostly stopped going to my Protestant activities. I kept my Protestant friends and occasionally joined Bible studies, but I gave most of my attention to the Catholic Church. I started, reluctantly, to attend Mass weekly, all the while complaining in my heart. Where was the thriving community I left? Still filled with pride, not desiring to understand the hearts of my Catholic peers, and very much wanting to make my parish "more Protestant," I started volunteering for the youth group.

During my time volunteering for youth ministry, I had no real love for the Church, but I knew I had to find answers. I decided that it was time to find the answers to my questions as I started typing

them into the Google search bar. If I was going to be Catholic, I needed to know what the Catholic Church actually said about all of my questions. How do Catholics engage with Mary? Or predestination, the idea that God has already chosen who will be saved and we can do nothing about it? What does it mean to be Catholic and have gay friends? How does the Catholic Church make sense of sexuality? Where do Jesus, the Gospel, and evangelization fit into any of this? I knew the sound-bite answers to all of these things, but I needed to own the *whys* of Catholicism for myself.

I read the catechism clips, the scriptures, the blog posts, and the articles. By the end of it all, through my research, I had fallen in love with the Catholic faith. I realized I was wrong about most of my critiques. I learned that the Gospel of Jesus Christ is at the front and center of Catholicism. Catholics care about evangelization so much that we uphold our greatest evangelists as saints. The Catholic Church gave us the Bible in the first place and many ways to encounter it—daily in the Mass readings, in *lectio divina*, and in scriptural meditations that we can pray through to enable the Holy Spirit to speak to us. I learned about the dignity of the human person. I finally understood that the Church “has so many rules” because sin has real, tangible, life-destroying consequences. The Church’s teachings on sexuality, marriage, and family are some of the most eye-opening teachings that I have ever read. Through my research, I learned what it meant to operate in reality as a Catholic. Finally, Catholicism merged with my reality in such a way that I could see the reality of Jesus Christ and his Church moving throughout history, into the present, and into my life. The story was making sense, and I saw how I fit in.

My dad had told me for years that the Catholic Church is the fullness of Truth, and I could finally see what he was saying. Everything that I loved about being Protestant existed to a greater and more glorious degree in the Catholic Church, right down to the Communion of Saints and the real presence of Jesus Christ in the Eucharist. In the Catholic Church, there is a deeper invitation to prayer, study, mission, and joy. It’s all there, so why was the experience of it all so different from what I was learning? If these teachings are so amazing, so life changing, so Jesus-centric, then what

the heck is going on in our religion classes, our Masses, and our Catholic institutions? Why had it taken me so long to discover the rich, mind-blowing, life-changing beauty of being Catholic? Why have so many Catholics lived their entire lives never even knowing that it's all there waiting for them?

This, my dear friend, is why I am writing this book. It is everything I would want to say to you if we were sitting on an airplane and you casually mentioned that you are a lapsed Catholic. For at least the past three generations, our everyday experience of Catholicism has done an incredible disservice to the faith that we profess and the people who are supposed to profess it. I have watched my generation bleed out of the Church, and since I was one of them, I don't blame them.

The Catholic Church contains within her deposit of faith the best news in the universe, but we have hidden it away with lousy catechesis, awkward experiences within the parish, and leadership that has failed to stay true to Jesus Christ and his Church, as well as our own personal proclivity toward sin and our tendency to turn away from the living God. There is a significant gap between the beauty that awaits us in the teachings of Catholicism and the lackluster daily experience of the average Catholic. This is what I seek to explore.

At face value, there are a million valid reasons to leave the Church for anywhere or anything else, whether it be the local Protestant church or atheism or yoga-type spirituality, and we who are living out the Catholic faith need to face this with boldness. There are also, hidden under the mess, infinite reasons to embrace Jesus Christ, his Church, and his mission. We must bring them to light. All of these reasons eventually boil down to one: Christianity is the Truth, and Catholicism is the fullness of that Truth. It is the answer to the desires of the human heart.

I hope for your sake that I can do justice to both. This is not a book that is meant to bash the Church, although I do not intend to sugarcoat any of the problems plaguing the Church today. I want to talk about them honestly, hopefully even with a sense of humor, as I believe that every Western Catholic alive will be able to relate to the issues in at least one if not all of the chapters. After discussing

these issues, I hope to share with you what I learned about the Church and why I fell in love with being a Catholic. There is more than meets the eye here. While there is much work to be done, it would be a shame for those of us who were raised in the Church to miss the jewel that has been right in front of us all along.

1.

Going beyond Mediocre Masses

What I Experienced

My dear college friend Barton and I were catching up over iced coffee at a local trendy shop in Houston, Texas. I was one of the few LSU students who didn't immediately move to Houston after graduation, so I always have tons of friends to catch up with during my visits, and Barton is one of my favorites. He brings intelligence and wit to every conversation. We caught up on everything—what it's like living where we do, who we were dating, and the ups and downs of work. I told him stories from ministry, and he told me about his world of real estate development.

As our coffee time came to a close, the topic of Sunday plans came up. "Want to do brunch tomorrow?" he asked.

"I'd love to, but I'll be going to Mass in the morning."

"Oh great; I'll come too and then we can go to brunch."

"That sounds good; I'll give Heidi a call and invite her too." To my great surprise, my friend Heidi told me that she, too, would come for Mass and brunch. All of my friends from college, except for two, are no longer practicing Catholics. Normally, if I get too

“Jesus-y” on them, they kindly change the subject, and when it comes to my life of ministry, they take a “you do you” approach. Imagine my shock this Saturday when, by the time I had talked to everyone, I had four fallen-away Catholics ready to attend Mass with me. I knew how impactful one good Mass experience could be. I prayed and hoped that we would find a church service that would blow them away and bring them right back into the folds of faith.

We arrived the next morning at a parish in a wealthier part of Houston. We found a pew, and the cantor started the opening hymn with a pitch no one else could hit. In response, the congregation stood silently with blank faces. Churches often have bad music and uninterested participants, but this time it was different. I don’t know if I just wanted it to be good for my friends and so I noticed it all so much more, or if was actually worse than usual. Either way, I knew they noticed too—a glaring reminder of why they don’t normally do this.

As the Mass continued, I realized the poor singing and lack of participation were trivial compared to the attitude of the priest. Rarely in my life had I seen a priest so uninterested in the ritual at hand. Every move he made on that altar revealed how little he cared. There was no inflection in his voice. The homily communicated nothing, especially nothing about the Christian life, and by the way he handled Communion, you would think he was simply giving out stupid pieces of gum. Again, the congregation responded by receiving the Eucharist with blank faces, Louis Vuittons in hand, ready to complete their obligation and get the hell out of there. I understood. I had given my life to ministry for Jesus Christ and his Church, and even I could see how one’s time would seemingly be better spent on literally anything else.

I sat there yelling at the priest in my mind. *I brought them to you! I brought them here to the table, to Jesus Christ himself! The least you could do is make them want to come back! The Mass is meant to bring forth the deepest mystery in the universe—can we at least do it a bit of justice? And why give your life to something you don’t seem to believe anyway?* I wished I could actually say that to the priest so that I could hear his response. I wished that I could convince my friends that being a Catholic was the best thing ever, despite

what this Mass showed them. I wished that they wanted what I had found, and I knew that at some level they did or they wouldn't have attended Mass that day. The Church had missed another opportunity for evangelization. I could say what I wanted to my friends, but their personal experience had a voice too. Walking out of the church that day, totally disheartened, I knew that my dear friends would not be returning, and I was right.

I would bet millions that you have had the similar lackluster experiences at Mass. You don't really want to go, but it's what your family does. You aren't quite sure what's happening or why you go in the first place. And let's face it: it doesn't really make a difference in your life anyway. After years of sitting, standing, and kneeling for no particular reason, it gets tiring. Every single Catholic in America has experienced the sometimes endearing but generally frustrating mediocrity of the Sunday service. Even if you happened to grow up in a wonderful, vibrant church with great community, good music, and great messages, I imagine that you were well aware that your parish was the exception, not the rule.

It's not just bad music. It's disengaged priests such as the one in Houston who either quit writing new homilies or gave sermons that managed to stir the soul with all the passion and excitement of waiting on dial-up internet. It's the ones who are so overzealous that every congregant walks out assured of their place waiting in hell. It's those crotchety people who have been in the pews for years harboring their judgment and refusing to move for the newcomer; these Catholics attend Mass every week but don't go out of their way to welcome anyone and don't seem as if they've ever met Jesus. Sometimes it feels as if they are actively trying to get people to leave the Church.

I remember my sister-in-law telling me of the time that a eucharistic minister refused to give my six-year-old nephew a blessing because it was "against the rules." Are you kidding me? We literally bless people when they sneeze. My brother and sister-in-law are committed Catholics for better or worse, but if they weren't, they could go to any one of the Protestant churches in the area and blessings would be bestowed upon them in abundance. There is one down the road from their house that actually specializes in making

church awesome for little kids. The music is concert worthy. The preaching is powerful and relatable. Not only are they hospitable, but also they have an entire committee dedicated to hospitality. That's right: an entire group of people is intentionally strategizing on how to make you feel welcome on a Sunday. And if that isn't impressive enough, we cannot forget the coffee shop in the church. You can still worship with one hand up and your coffee in the other.

I went to one of these kinds of churches for years. Why wouldn't I? Why wouldn't you? It makes total sense that Catholics would stop going to a Mass that we don't understand and that feels like a time warp in all the worst ways. I hear the statistics that only 21 percent of professing Catholics attend Mass weekly,¹ and I get it. Out of many of my childhood friends who were raised Catholic, almost none of them still attend Mass or practice any part of Catholicism at all, along with millions of people around the world.

Faithful Catholics see the problem and are heartbroken, but so often I hear defenses of the Church only from those who have been won over by the beauty and truth of its teachings. After my time in the folds of great Sunday productions in the nondenominational services, I too was won over by the beauty and truth of Catholicism. I found that everything I loved about being Protestant was waiting for me in the Catholic Church to be discovered at a fuller, deeper level. Living my life as a devout Catholic has brought me deep, abiding joy, but I discovered these riches only after spending years away from my Catholic faith, first on the verge of atheism and then in other churches.

I am not saying that rock-star church services are what the Catholic Church needs in order to keep people in the pews or to facilitate the highest form of worship. I don't believe this, and I don't worship in this manner. I think we must, however, recognize that the laziness with which we have conducted and participated in the Mass for generations has made the rock-star church model attractive. We cannot ignore the many ways that those of us in the Church have failed the millions of men and women who are no longer in the pews. It is completely valid to stop participating in something that you don't understand and that doesn't bring you closer to God. If the Sunday experience, which is supposed to be