



CHAPTER 1

WHAT CAN'T YOU LIVE WITHOUT?

Student A: Miss Prejean, I like your Chacos. You look like you're ready to go on an adventure.

Me: Studying and teaching theology means I'm on an eternal adventure!

Student B: Way to make it weird, Miss P

A SIMPLE QUESTION

In the fall of 2008, I had the incredible opportunity to study abroad with the University of Dallas (UD) Sophomore Rome Program. At nineteen years old, I boarded a plane and headed off for what would be the greatest adventure of my life. I was of course excited—*who wouldn't be?* I had the whole of Europe as my playground and a thirst to see the world. But I was

also anxious, because I knew that by the end of the semester I would have to choose my major and decide on an academic advisor. The excitement of Rome lay ahead of me, but so did the frightening realization that my future would be at least partially determined by the major I had to choose in just a few short months.

The semester flew by, each day more incredible than the last. I hiked Mount Vesuvius in Pompeii, stood in Corinth, Greece, and read Paul's letter to the early Christian community there, drank beer in Germany, hiked the Cliffs of Moher in Ireland, ate strudel in Austria, ran a foot race in Olympia, was hungry in Hungary (really—I ate only one meal over a three day visit there), and prayed in the most beautiful church in all of Christendom, St. Peter's Basilica, countless times. Traveling to more than a dozen countries was just one small part of the semester, though. We were there to learn, not just from the world we were discovering, but also from our remarkably intelligent professors. We read *The Merchant of Venice* and then went and stood on the Rialto with Dr. Gregory Roper. Ancient Greco-Roman art and architecture became our specialty, and Dr. Laura Flusche would point out the column style and estimated date of every building we passed. The history and philosophy of Western civilization was brought to life by Drs. Peter Hatlie and Brad Blue who taught us the texts of Plato, Euripides, and countless others, and then brought us to Greece to see the very land in which the ancient philosophers and historians lived and about which they wrote.

One course stood out above all the rest: Western Theological Traditions. It traced the development of theological thought from the earliest days of the Church to the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s. We were reading the first texts outlining the doctrines of Catholicism and then visiting the catacombs where the first Christians worshipped and were eventually

buried. We studied Aquinas's *Summa* and then stood in the orange grove he walked through, where he could be found arguing aloud with himself to clarify his points. We discussed the rich depth of the Vatican II documents, learning that we hadn't even begun to feel the earthquake from the modern council that was meant to be St. John XXIII's "breath of fresh air" for the Church. While all the classes were enlightening and impactful, this one was slowly convincing me that maybe I wanted to major in theology.

Not only was the course fantastic, but the professor leading us through the material was simply stellar. Dr. Mark Lowery was what I had always pictured a college professor would be like. He wore plaid shirts and khaki pants with a pleat down the middle and he'd had a salt and pepper goatee longer than I'd been alive. Above all else, Dr. Lowery had a deep and abiding passion for theology, and he never missed an opportunity to teach us the Truths of the Faith. He would eat dinner with us in the cafeteria, sitting with a new group of students every evening. He would wander into the commons area the night before a big exam and offer to further explain concepts we were struggling with, sometimes lighting up his pipe and joining the smokers outside for some friendly theological banter. He was a regular at daily Mass in the tiny, fifteen-person chapel on campus, often leaving his copy of *Magnificat* on the chair closest to the door. We all knew that was his spot. Dr. Lowery's smile was contagious, his laughter booming, his mind brilliant, and his fatherly spirit a comfort to us all.

A couple of weeks before the semester ended, right before finals were scheduled to begin, Dr. Lowery offered to take a group of students into the city for a walk through Piazza Navona to see Bernini's Fountain of the Four Rivers and visit the Church of St. Agnes of Rome. We had learned about the piazza, but hadn't officially visited it in any of our classes,

so I jumped at the chance to see more of the city I'd soon be leaving. About a dozen of us set off with Dr. Lowery, ready for one final full day in the Eternal City. After a few hours wandering through the piazza and praying at the remains of St. Agnes, the majority of the group disbanded, some heading off to find gelato or to the other side of the city to watch an evening sunset in St. Peter's Square. I found myself alone with Dr. Lowery, standing on the far end of the piazza, looking out at the vendors selling their wares and the tourists studying their guidebooks. With a mischievous smile, Dr. Lowery asked me if I wanted to see one last thing before heading back to campus. He promised me it would be worth the short walk, so I immediately said yes and we took off toward the Basilica of St. Augustine, home to a lesser-known Caravaggio painting, *Madonna di Loreto*, and the tomb of St. Monica, the diligently praying mother of the young, party-animal Augustine.

As we weaved through the throngs of people crowding the small cobblestone streets, Dr. Lowery and I began talking about the semester. I told him how much I had enjoyed each class and every trip I'd had the chance to take, and he shared with me how truly invigorating it had been to teach in the city that was home to the theological discipline, his first and truest love. As we reached the Basilica of St. Augustine, both winded from the brisk walk, we took a moment to sit down on the steps and catch our breath. There was a comfortable silence between us as we looked up at the façade of the church, and Dr. Lowery casually asked me if I had chosen a major yet. He had no idea that for the past week I'd been battling with myself, flip-flopping between two different options. The inquiry threw me a bit off guard, so I decided to answer his question with a question.

Me: I'm having a hard time choosing between English and theology. What do you think I should major in?

Dr. Lowery: Katie, let me ask you this: if you had to give up reading or studying one of those subjects . . . say, you can never read Shakespeare again, how would you feel? If you had to give up theology, what would you think of that? It comes down to a simple question, really. . . . What can't you live without?

When Dr. Lowery posed the question, "What can't you live without?" on the steps of the basilica, I felt an instant tug on my heart to focus on the study of God. The thought of never studying God again was maddening. I couldn't walk away from theology. . . it was the only subject I'd ever found that had satisfied my appetite for Truth and also inspired me to keep learning more. There would never be an end to the discipline, because there is no end to God. An infinite subject means there is an infinite amount to learn, an infinite amount to discover, and an infinite amount with which to fall in love. As explained by the Jesuit theologian Karl Rahner, to study theology is to set sail in search of the infinite horizon. I would be able to see the line splitting the water and the sky off in the distance, but I would never reach that line. I would just go further and further out to sea, the distance from the original shore increasing as I dove further into the depths of God. As my academic advisor at UD, Dr. Christopher Malloy would later say, "we're going to go scuba diving into Truth!" To study God would be to study the realest, most complete thing in the universe. It would be an active approach to his presence, day in and day out. I would never become bored because I would never exhaust the endless wealth of information there was to gain. Dr. Lowery posed a question on the steps of that church that rocked my world, and I instantly realized that, more than anything else, I would rather be studying and sharing theology.

PALPABLE PASSION

As a kid, I hated math. My brain just didn't work in a mathematical way. I struggled for years with the subject and spent many a night at the kitchen table reviewing problems with my mom and dad, one a very successful business-owning CPA and the other vice-president and security director of a bank. I was the child of number-crunching people who was tortured on the regular by algebra, geometry, and calculus. My parents didn't want me to just make decent grades in math—they wanted me to really enjoy the subject. They had always taught me that memorizing concepts wasn't enough when it came to school. Learning shouldn't be about memorization and regurgitation, nor should it be a torturous experience—it is supposed to be an exercise in understanding the Truth, and the Truth should be exciting and fulfilling, whether it comes by way of math, biology, English, or history. Despite their valiant efforts, the "let's help Katie love math" project of the early 2000s failed miserably. I hated math, math hated me, and there was no resolving our numerous issues. I could solve at least one problem correctly: $Katie + \text{math homework} = \text{disaster, tears, and wailing and gnashing of teeth}$. I was doomed to a life of struggling in the subject, and I accepted my fate.

Then I met and was taught by Ms. Lynn Ruozzi, who taught Algebra I at my high school. Ms. Ruozzi had a love of numbers that was felt the second you stepped foot in her classroom. She made the subject fun and math became a bit more tolerable in my ninth-grade year. The next year, a veritable legend in the halls of St. Louis Catholic High, Mrs. Debbie Herpin, taught me geometry. A healthy mix of stern and sweet, she was a stickler for the dress code and hated when students chewed gum, but she also loved formulas, theorems, and proofs. She even wrote raps and performed them to teach

us how to solve for the area of various shapes. I then had Mrs. Linda Gail Shumaker, the only person who, up to that point, made “solving for x ” less of a guessing game and more of a scavenger hunt for the right number hidden in the formula that needed to be used. She and math were best friends, and she made no secret of the fact that she loved teaching it. My last year of high school, Mr. Casey Vincent, my student council advisor and mentor, taught me pre-calculus, making himself available for tutoring every day I needed it so that I could get the grade I wanted. With chalk-covered pants and a slight twinkle in his eye, he never turned me away when I had a question or needed help. It never seemed to matter if I was having trouble with math or with life; he made time for me.

I was taught my least favorite subject by some of my favorite teachers, men and women who saw not just the material and a student struggling with it but the chance to influence a heart just as much as they helped mold a mind. I wasn't just a student whose name was slapped on the top of a test with half the problems solved incorrectly, a hopeless case with a brain far more equipped to read words than analyze numbers. I was a student for whom they wanted to make math meaningful, and they were willing to help me. They loved their subject, deeply, and wanted me to love it too, or at least endure it to the point of not being utterly miserable.

They had a palpable passion. You could feel it in their classrooms—a tangible, demonstrable excitement about their subject that they wanted to convey and share with their students. Even if a kid hated math, like I did, we couldn't help but love the teacher because we knew the teacher loved us. The subject was important, yes, but the student learning the subject was the priority, whether they were breezing through the class with all As or struggling to squeak out a D.

When I began teaching in August 2012, three of those four teachers were still teaching at my high school. I wanted to model my approach after theirs, showing a love for theology that students would be able to recognize and be inspired by from day one. On the steps of a church in Rome I had decided to focus on the study of God, and now here I was with a classroom of my own to share the knowledge I had gained. I wanted to convey the same excitement they and many other teachers had shown me. I wanted my subject to be as powerful to my students as it was to me, and I wanted to show them I cared as much about them as my math teachers had cared about me.

The first lecture I gave in my classroom the first week of school was, in my utterly biased opinion, nothing short of epic. Based on the opening chapters of Frank Sheed's *Theology and Sanity*, I explained to my students how my class, Theology I, was the study of reality, because God is the realest thing in the universe. To gain knowledge of him would be to meet the Creator face to face, helping them see the rest of the world and study every subject in the proper light of his existence. I explained to them that to not study God, or to not even believe in God, would be to ignore reality, making the non-studying, non-believing person insane. That's the definition of insanity—to ignore reality. I was as simple and straightforward as I thought I could be, and I was positive I knocked the opening lecture out of the park. I just knew that these freshmen were going to love theology more than I did by the end of the year. *I was convinced.*

But then, in the last class on the Friday of that first week, a student sitting in the front row raised his hand at the end of my rousing lecture. He politely asked me if I could prove God's existence to him. Here was my moment: I could show off all that technical, hard-hitting theology I'd so diligently

studied in college, making that absurdly expensive framed piece of paper hanging in my house worth it. I turned to the board, blue Expo marker in hand, and began outlining Thomas Aquinas's Five Proofs of God's Existence, beginning with the Argument from Motion. Arrowed diagrams began filling up the board next to a "timeline of existence" I had quickly scribbled. From there, I launched into the Argument from Causality and was just about to begin explaining the Argument from Governance when the bell rang. Students (who had gotten far more than they bargained for in the first week of Theology I) quickly began packing up their backpacks, ready to rush out probably hoping to never see me again. But the student who had posed the question held back and approached me.

Student: Miss Prejean, I appreciate you explaining all that, but I just don't think God is real. There's just no way.

What wisdom this kid had! He was exhibiting such powerful intelligence by claiming to not believe the sheer genius of St. Thomas Aquinas, one of the greatest minds this world has ever known. Of course this fourteen-year-old was correct, there most certainly wasn't a God because if a high school freshman boy couldn't grasp his existence, then there's no way it could be true. Obviously! Or not . . .

It had been a long first week. I was tired, my hand was a bit sore from the death grip I'd had on the marker, and now I had a teenager declaring himself an atheist at the ripe, old age of fourteen. I was done, spent, mentally exhausted, and physically drained, so what I said next was naïve, arrogant, and just plain stupid. It is perhaps the moment I regret most in the course of my teaching career, the first-week blunder I never would have made had I followed the examples of my

favorite teachers who had taught me my least favorite subject years before in the very same school.

Me: If you don't believe in God then you're just ignoring reality, and that's insane.

INVITATION TO BELIEVE

The weeks following my encounter with that particular student were quite challenging. The Tuesday after I called him insane, he came into class with a list of questions about God, Catholicism, evolution, and scripture. A week after I called him insane, he brought in a copy of *The God Delusion* by Richard Dawkins and proceeded to read it in the front row while I taught the class. A month after I called him insane, he turned in his first test thirty seconds after I passed it out, "The Bible is the greatest fairytale ever told" written in every blank. Six weeks into the year, he transferred to another school, his parents citing "unresolvable differences" with the vision of the school and "consistent disagreements" with a certain teacher in Room 24.

Within two months of beginning my teaching career, I had managed to drive a student out of the only Catholic high school in our diocese because I was mostly concerned about proving a point to convince him I was right and he was wrong. Not only had I done exactly what my favorite teachers would never have done but I also ignored the examples of Jesus and the saints throughout the history of the Church.

While standing before him for sentencing, Jesus Christ didn't answer Pontius Pilate's query, "What is Truth?" with a scoffing laugh, shaking his head and saying, "Wouldn't you like to know!" When St. Peter began preaching to the large crowds of people after the descent of the Holy Spirit on

Pentecost, I doubt he would have looked at anyone expressing disagreement and said, "Well, you're just insane." In a debate on matters of doctrine, St. Augustine certainly didn't turn to his opponent and declare his argument null and void with the charge, "That's absurd, and you're wrong." If Mother Teresa were to encounter a man or woman dying in a ditch who had no belief in the one, true God, her reaction would not be to turn them away but rather to welcome them, care for them, and love them no differently than she would any faithful Christian. But I am not Jesus, Sts. Peter or Augustine, or Blessed Mother Teresa of Calcutta.

No, I am arrogant, have-to-be-right-all-the-time, consistent sinner Katie Prejean, who on a Friday in August of 2012 looked at a fourteen-year-old boy and told him he was insane because he didn't believe in God. This is certainly not the evangelization tactic Jesus Christ envisioned his followers would one day utilize. Jesus told his disciples to "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations . . . teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you" (Mt 28:19a, 20a). He did not say "Cut them down at the knees and then they'll believe us!" Jesus Christ did not insult the non-believer and criticize the sinner. He ate dinner with them. He didn't look at people questioning his teachings and call them insane. He explained it to them on their terms by telling parables and performing miracles. When someone pressed Jesus for a deeper explanation, he gave it, not because he just wanted to prove a point but because he wanted to actively, personally illustrate the Truth. Jesus Christ did not come just to teach us a list of things to memorize and recite. He came to save us. He came to build a relationship with us. He came to love us. If we are going to follow his explicit command to "do as I have done for you," then our approach to evangelization must be modeled after his. It is not our primary task to prove a point. Our first job is

to love those whom we have the chance to teach, and the point proving will follow in due time.

We must first become like Christ and meet people where they are, see them for who they are, and love them there. The “I’m right, you’re wrong” mentality must be struck from the script when we evangelize. Better yet, we should burn the script and bury the ashes because a cookie-cutter approach to sharing the Truth is a surefire way to ensure someone will walk away from the experience with a bad taste in his or her mouth. There’s no denying that Jesus never wavered in teaching the Truth, standing his ground as he built the Kingdom. But he stood that ground by being grounded in charity, filled with compassion for the people whose very lives he created and saved. Jesus knew that acceptance of the Truth is personal, not something to be forced. He did not shove the Gospel down people’s throats, causing them to choke on his words. Jesus presented his message and then let people choose to accept it on their own. This “freedom to choose” is at the heart of Jesus’s preaching, seen in both the story of the rich young man and the Bread of Life discourse.

When a wealthy young man approaches Jesus, curious about how he can gain eternal life, Jesus’s answer to “keep the commandments” doesn’t seem to satisfy him. This young man claims he already follows these commands, so he asks, “What do I still lack?” indicating that he wants to go beyond the bare minimum. The rich young man is clearly yearning for something deeper, hoping to discover that which will satisfy a desperate longing in his heart. He is experiencing the deep internal dissatisfaction that St. Augustine wrote about centuries later: “Our hearts are restless until they rest in You, O Lord.” Jesus sees into the young man’s heart, recognizes his desire, and extends an invitation that will surely help him grow: “If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions

and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me." Jesus knew what held the young man back from the Truth and invited him to let go of the attachments that weighed him down so that the young man could gain what he desperately wanted. The Truth is laid out before the rich young man. Here are the instructions that must be followed to satisfy his deepest desire to gain eternal life and live the abundant life the Lord promises. Jesus could be no more clear and concise! But the rich young man can't accept it. He can't fathom a world in which his possessions are not primary, and so he walks away sad (see Mt 18:16–22).

Rather than point and laugh at the young man who has been sobered by his deep attachment to stuff, Jesus turns to his apostles and assures them that anyone, even the most materialistic of people, can be saved through the power of God. Jesus doesn't run after the young man and grab him by the collar, fussing at him for being so stupid and arrogant and insisting he listen to what he has to say. Jesus simply continues to explain to his disciples that this life of denial and sacrifice for God will pay dividends countless times over in the next life. Jesus lets the young man walk away and focuses his attention on those still present with him, imploring them to remain faithful to what he has said and assuring them of salvation if they do so.

We see a similar approach to ministry in the sixth chapter of John's gospel. After Jesus boldly proclaims his flesh is true food and his blood true drink, many people in the crowd "turned back and no longer went about with him." Jesus doesn't run after them, wagging his finger in their faces and fussing at them for denying what he just taught. He doesn't raise his voice and insist they continue listening to him lest they burn in hell for eternity. He doesn't pull the "God card" and assert great power. No, Jesus does none of that. Instead,

his calm, peaceful response is one from which we must learn. Again, we see Jesus turn to his disciples and ask them, "Do you also wish to go away?" He poses a question that invites his followers to acknowledge whether or not they have embraced the Truth. Simon Peter's response is simple and beautiful, showing that he and the rest of the apostles have accepted the Truth personally and allowed it to take root in their hearts: "Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and are convinced that you are the Holy One of God" (Jn 6:66–69). Jesus does not look at anyone and call him or her insane for rejecting what he has said. Instead, he turns to the apostles who are already accepting the Truth and invites them to launch further in. Perhaps the greatest way to love both the rich young man and the crowd of doubting listeners was to let them go off and ponder what he had said and allow them to accept the Truth at a time when they were ready to receive it.

Jesus was certainly right in what he preached to the rich young man and to the multitudes of listeners. We can't be attached to the things of this world if we want to love God fully, nor can we deny the validity of his flesh and blood as our one true source of eternal nourishment and salvation. God did not create humanity to be mindless robots forced to follow him, but instead he created us in his image and likeness with free will and the ability to choose. Likewise, Jesus lets those whom he heals and to whom he preaches freely choose whether to believe the Truth or to reject it. The invitation Jesus extends is not a mandate for belief or a command to worship. He does not force acceptance. We get to choose. Belief in the Truth is an opportunity laid before us, an invitation to a relationship that can be freely accepted or declined.

If we are forced to believe anything, the belief rings hollow. If we are forced to do anything, the action is less meaningful.