

# Preface

My parents believed, and I trusted them. So I believed. We believed in God and salvation through Jesus Christ, and we lived our beliefs as Roman Catholics. Ask me exactly what I believed growing up and what I believe today and the Catholic-school-educated, Mass-going, doctrine-quoting me will recite the tenets of the Nicene Creed—a profession of the faith into which I was baptized as an infant, in a Church I’ve loved with a blinding passion all my life. Ask me if I have ever doubted, questioned, or even knowingly rejected my creed, and if I’m being honest, I will with tender remorse answer yes. I am, of course, a sinner—but a hopeful, optimistic one. I trust that grace will save me.

I’m fairly certain that at the heart of every Christian believer is a determined will to not only share the Good News but also to radiate at least a small glimmer of God’s love to everyone we meet. At the core of each of us lies the conviction that by encountering us, others ought to know at least some tiny measure of God’s enduring love. Because I believe this, I have tried to submit my life to God, the source of every good gift. I want to live my life loving God by generously giving the best

parts of what he has created in me to the service and love of others.

The more I ponder the connection between my faith and all the other pieces of my life, the more intimately I am able to see the unbroken bond between God's infinite grace and my profound desire to consistently choose the path of greatest generosity. I don't make this statement boastfully. As a wife, a mother, a writer, and a Christian trudging a daily footpath toward Christ, I am ever cognizant of my shortcomings. But I've also been at this journey long enough to recognize God's fascinating and loving hand at work in my life, especially in moments where grace—God's deep, abiding blessing—is the only plausible explanation for the goodness that's been showered on me.

I am reminded of the opening verses of the Letter to the Hebrews, which in my Catholic Bible reads, "Faith is the realization of what is hoped for and evidence of things not seen" (11:1). In my fifty-plus years of walking with Christ, I have repeatedly found surprising and intriguing evidence of things not seen. Faith is the connection—the spiritual bridge—between the lingering doubts I sometimes have and the discipline of "Yes, Lord, I believe."

As I grow along my path as a Christian, I want to more radically commit myself to generosity of spirit—a gift of the stuff that God has placed within me to the work he puts before me. Generous living doesn't simply mean to be a financial giver or the person who can be relied upon to help out in a pinch. Rather, I'm learning that generous living is a consistent, gentle stoking of

the embers placed within us into blazing fires of action, mission, transformative change, and loving service. I believe that when you and I err on the side of giving our own unique yeses to the call of God, we have the capacity to rock our world.

My hope for the exploration of the eight virtues around which this book is built is that you claim anew the faith-inspired yeses of your own life. I hope you share my delight and fascination with God's loving hand at work in our lives. But let's allow our marveling to be only the first step in a long process. A true yes to God means moving from profound recognition and delight to lasting, steady commitment, even when we doubt, fear, or simply feel exhausted.

Generous living entails both openness to God's plan and a plan of our own. We each need a plan for total engagement in the virtues that lie at the heart of generous living: belief, generativity, creativity, integrity, humility, vulnerability, saying no, and rebirth. I hope that recognizing and seizing the grace of yes in your life will be a gift for you, as it has been for me, and will help you get started—for the first time or once again—on the sacred path of generosity.

I encourage you to ponder the questions at the end of each chapter on your own or with trusted friends. The prayers that close each chapter are my words, placed there to invite you into dialogue with our loving Creator. May this book help to crystalize in your mind and heart the gifts of your own unique yes, your own path of generous giving along life's path to heaven. I share with you some of my story and invite you to connect it

to your own. Together may we praise God, who pokes, prods, and kindly leads us toward the awesome grace of ever-deepening yes.

# 1. The Grace *of* Belief



My mom, an only child, went off to Mass every Sunday with her mother, Bessie, while her father, Leroy, a deacon in the Lutheran church down the street from their Catholic one, said his own yes with a Missouri Synod accent. Two parents, two Christian denominations, one daughter, and a singular love for the Lord—it all worked beautifully for them.

My dad, the eldest of seven, was a mischievous altar boy raised by daily communicants in the Catholic Church. His parents, Wayne and Patty, reared seven spiritual seekers who ultimately chose diverse, and at times unconventional, spiritual paths but always respected their parents' unending commitment to their beliefs. Growing up, we were told that Grandma Patty's

extended family was distantly connected to St. Thérèse of Lisieux, the Little Flower. When I picture some of my favorite female saints, they physically resemble Grandma Patty. And in my mind's eye Grandpa Wayne stands beside these holy women, unwavering in his beliefs, his faith solid as a rock.

I came along as a surprise in 1963, born only ten months after my parents' big Catholic wedding and the firstborn grandchild on both sides of the family. My childhood was a continual object lesson in remaining open to God's plan. The eldest of five, I grew up in a home that epitomized "domestic church" before that phrase came into the popular Catholic lexicon. Don't get me wrong; ours wasn't an overly reverent or somber upbringing. I was catechized in the 1970s, when folk Masses were the rage and our school nuns rode skateboards.

I may not have been brought up on the Baltimore Catechism, but I knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that Jesus loved me. That sense of ultimate security was owed in near totality to my parents and to Msgr. Michael Collins, the Irish priest who was our pastor for many years. Truly believing that I was loved unconditionally and favored beyond measure was a blessing, but it also came with a mandate. Our gifts—spiritual, relational, and material—were destined to be shared with those around us. Faith came with duty. And it came with great joy.

I always believed. My faith life grew as a gift from my parents, who had inherited their faiths and practices from theirs. My childhood faith was simple, unquestioning. I sat at the feet of the Christ I saw depicted in

my picture bible, anxious like those little children in Matthew's nineteenth chapter, gathering close to receive his blessing. Jesus loved me. I was sure of it.

When I received Confirmation in eighth grade, my religion teacher taught me that by merit of this third Catholic sacrament I was called to be a witness to the faith in word and in deed. I was more perfectly bound by it to the Church and strengthened by the gifts of the Holy Spirit. I have to admit that I was far more concerned with the dress I was wearing that day and with how my hair looked than about how I would witness to others.

But the strength of the Spirit began to labor within the groundwork that had been laid so firmly by my parents. Slowly, imperceptibly, the trust that I had always had in them and what they had taught me became my own belief not only in a loving, all-powerful God but also in his Church. By the time I landed for my freshman year at the University of Notre Dame, I was fully committed to my beliefs and to offering a strong witness of them by my practice of Catholicism.

It was easy—and, honestly, fun—to be a believer at Notre Dame in the early 1980s. Mass was prayed in the company of our dormitory friends every night of the week. I often lingered in prayer at the campus grotto, lighting a candle as I offered my prayers, confident that God would hear and answer my needs. I became a daily communicant and saw signs of vibrant faith transformed into service all around me on campus. Having been raised so solidly Catholic and seeing my interior faith life blossom, I embraced my belief in God and in the Catholic Church with little to no doubt. My prayer

life flourished, my devotion to the Blessed Mother grew, and my enthusiasm for Christian service deepened. I loved being Catholic.

I can see now that believing back then was largely a “What’s in it for me?” proposal. I believed that God would hear and answer my prayers. I did not yet understand the mandate that being a believer also meant being first and foremost a generous spirit.

## Wings

It wasn’t until after my college graduation that I stopped equating going to church with having fun. While I had a few Protestant friends growing up—and was at one time a card-carrying member of the Good News Club (albeit horrible at memorizing scripture verses)—I rarely had encountered anyone who didn’t share my Catholic beliefs. So when my engagement to Greg Hendeley whisked me out of graduate school in Phoenix, Arizona, and into the life of a working girl in the Bible-belt city of Nashville, Tennessee, my spiritual frame of reference was flipped on its head. I found myself working full time in an office full of Southern Baptists who considered my religious pedigree questionable at best. One friend in my office, a faith-filled young woman, actually told me that for her to have married a Roman Catholic would have been more devastating to her parents than had she “hooked up with a Hare Krishna.”

Greg, a fellow graduate of Notre Dame, had been nominally raised Lutheran but really wasn’t a religious person. He had been thrust into a fully Catholic world at Notre Dame, and while he’d gone with the flow, he

didn't have strong feelings on the topic—or at least he didn't express them at the time. I recall a heart-to-heart conversation with my father as things were getting serious with Greg. I had assured Daddy that Greg was a good person and that we had agreed to raise our children in the Catholic faith. I can see now that I had no concept of what that really meant or just how challenging it would prove to be.

Nashville brought my first real encounter with spiritual doubt. Greg was swamped with his studies as a first-year medical student, which meant that I often went to church alone. This was a lifetime first, and going to church became a struggle. After a lifetime of worshipping with family and friends, the expression of my faith became a solitary pursuit. The seeds that had been sown so lovingly by my parents and that had blossomed so well at Notre Dame began to wither and fade. I didn't stop believing. It just began to feel like work. Perhaps, for the very first time, my yes was my own. And I gave it begrudgingly.

As a part of our wedding vows, Greg and I promised to raise our children Catholic. In actuality, that promise was all on me, since I was the Catholic in the relationship. Greg couldn't have been more awesome about going along with our commitment and my wishes. In the early years of our marriage, before our children were born, he helped me find various churches as our life together took us through medical school in Nashville and on to his residency at UCLA. Greg would come with me to church as often as his schedule permitted, but it often didn't. It was in those first five years together that I came to more fully understand the words "Sunday

obligation.” Even though Sunday-morning Mass had been the focal point of my life for so many years, I’m sad to say that I often sat in the pew alone, feeling unfulfilled. All too often, I left not only uninspired but also frustrated and grumbling to myself, “I didn’t get anything out of that.”

The fifty-year-old Lisa would love to go back in time to that twenty-something yuppie and talk some sense into her. Somehow, even though I had lived a quarter-century learning scripture and Church teachings, two important concepts were missing from my frame of reference. First and foremost, I didn’t really grasp the centrality of the Eucharist as a core *belief* in my faith, although attending Mass had always been a core practice. Second, and equally as disappointing to me now, was a lack of awareness of my responsibility to be an active part of my faith community, to put something *in* rather than just get something *out* of worship.

During our early marriage, I tried out many pews, church-shopping my way around Southern California and looking for a pastor who was entertaining in a church that was pretty and had good music. I see now that my search was for the wrong things. I was a consumer, not a giver or a true member of the Body of Christ. I was like a family member who showed up looking for a place to stay but refusing to commit in any way to building a bond. I was not yet mature enough in my beliefs to recognize that as a Christian, my church was a second family that had the same core need for my self-giving as my own nuclear family did.

The perfect-church characteristics I shopped for and thought I needed were most neatly delivered in a

small parish in Seal Beach, California, where my parents had moved when Greg and I were getting settled in Los Angeles. By strange coincidence or divine intervention, I was reunited with my childhood pastor, Msgr. Collins, behind the altar at that church. He was now aging but still full of humor and an infectious faith. In that tidy little seaside church, his lilting Irish accent proclaimed the gospel reading in a way that began to beckon me back to long-forgotten truths. When we brought our firstborn, Eric Michael (named in honor of that holy man), forward for Baptism in that little Seal Beach slice of heaven, Greg and I stood together at the baptismal font, renewed our Baptismal promises to live as faithful Christians, and committed to raise Eric in that same faith and way of life.

It was at that moment that the words to an old song I played on my guitar at church in my youth became marching orders for me.

It only takes a spark, to get a fire going.  
And soon all those around, can warm up in  
its glowing.  
That's how it is with God's love, once you've  
experienced it,  
It's fresh like spring, you want to sing, you  
want to pass it on!

By that point my belief—my yes to those things I had been taught over so many years—was finally fully my own. I knew God's love. I had witnessed it so fully that I couldn't wait to share it with this precious little soul. Here was overwhelming evidence of grace.