

# Introduction

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What is the deepest desire of your heart? What stirs in your heart as a longing that burns to be fulfilled?

If you had asked me those questions many years ago, I would have told you that I wanted to be rich and famous. Had you asked me about my career aspirations when I was a teenager, I would have told you that I wanted to work for ESPN or be the CEO of a successful company. I really wanted to be someone. I wanted to make a difference in this world, and I wanted to do it in a big way. In college, I was on my way: while playing volleyball on a scholarship at a Division I university, I pursued internships at a television station, a radio station, and a public relations firm. I envisioned myself in a high-profile job with lots of travel, glamour, and money.

There is nothing inherently wrong with success, but in spite of prestigious internships, a high-level college volleyball career, and an endless stream of parties and men, I felt empty and broken. On the exterior, I probably seemed happy and content, but I was dying on the inside.

Waking up one morning after a long night of partying, I recalled all the horrible things I had done the night before. My disgust with myself and my life was piercing because I had promised myself

that I was going to change, that I was going to live differently. I couldn't stand the sin that I was regularly indulging in, but no matter how good my intentions were, I kept falling right back into the same patterns. The pain was so deep that day that I curled up into a little ball on the floor of my room and wished for death. I ached for so much more than the life I was living.

It was often in the quiet moments, deep in the night, that bubbles of truth would well up to the surface of my heart. When coming home from some party or during the rare times when I was sitting in silence, a deep unhappiness would emerge. I had always thought that if I was successful enough and perfect enough, if enough people liked me and approved of me, I would be happy. But I wasn't happy—I was shattered. In my heart, I wanted to live a life of truth and beauty; I wanted a life of freedom and joy. I was very hungry for a better life, but I didn't know how to find one.

The twelve-step program for recovering alcoholics proclaims, "We are only as sick as our secrets." By the time I was twenty-one years old, I had secrets of abuse, alcohol addiction, and lust. I was a sick young woman on many levels, and I was trying to make myself feel better by seeking happiness the only way I knew how: through pleasure and self-gratification at any cost. Mainstream society tells us that religion is outdated and that there is no

such thing as right or wrong—in short, that we have no need of Jesus. I had stopped attending church regularly and did whatever I wanted with my “freedom,” but this did not bring me the joy I was after. All I could see were shadows and darkness, and I had no idea how to become truly free. I was stuck and sinking fast.

Yet in the midst of this darkness, a light began to shine in the barrenness of my broken heart. Authentic love gently, but directly, intervened in my life in the form of a very holy and brave Catholic priest named Fr. Santan Pinto. Father knew that my life was sinful and broken, but he did not shame me. He saw beauty in me where I saw only ugliness, and he continually encouraged me to seek an authentic life with God, rather than waste my life in sin. The friendship and fatherhood Fr. Pinto shared with me over the course of many years changed my destiny. He taught me that the ideologies the world imposes upon us are utterly false. The reality is that we are made for goodness, truth, and beauty. We long for more because we are made for more. This is humanity’s calling.

Seeing Jesus Christ in this devoted man of God began to set my mind and heart free to dream and to love. This transformation from darkness into light was, and still is, a slow and sometimes painful process but worth the effort. You see, our hearts long for authentic love because we were made in and

for authentic love. No amount of lust, greed, glamour, pleasure, or fame will ever satisfy us because we aren't made for falsehood and passing things. Even surrounded by the good and beautiful things of this earth, we still ache and yearn and long. We are made for eternity; we are attracted by love.

In this book, I will share my heart and my story with you, as well as biblical stories and Church teaching, hoping to illumine a path in your own heart, for God often speaks to us in the stories of others. We will explore God's original plan for the human person, the brokenness we all face, and the real hope we have for freedom and redemption.

I want you to know that Jesus Christ is real. He is real in history and he is also vibrantly real in our daily lives. He is alive. God's love for you and longing for you are real. You may not believe this, or you may feel disappointed by God and his Church. You may not want to have anything to do with God. He knows this because he knows you. He meets you and respects you wherever you find yourself. He calls. He waits. He invites. God has created us for himself, and as St. Augustine so fittingly wrote, "Our hearts are restless, O Lord, until they rest in You." The great journey of authentic love is the most challenging yet most rewarding journey you will ever make. Are you ready to step forward on this journey? Come and see.

## Chapter 1

# Tell Me Who I Am

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*In the darkness, something was happening at last. A voice had begun to sing.*

—C. S. Lewis, *The Magician's Nephew*

*Then God said: Let us make human beings in our image, after our likeness.*

—Genesis 1:26

I still remember the smell of the middle school cafeteria in 1989. It was a combination of floor cleaner, floor wax, and whatever the lunch ladies were preparing on that particular day. As I stood in line, I scanned the crowd of kids, urgently looking for a friend to sit with. After getting my milk, hot dog, and cookie, I faced the mob of twelve- and thirteen-year-olds. I stared at the tables while trying to avoid the eyes of my classmates staring back at me.

Were they talking about me?

Did I look like a total loser standing there with no friends and no place to sit?

Could they see all the stuff in my heart that I tried so hard to hide?

I looked around in desperation. *Dang it.* None of my friends were at lunch. With all the

awkwardness of a skinny, braces-wearing, insecure thirteen-year-old girl, I plopped myself down at the end of a table with people I didn't want to talk to. If I pretended they didn't exist, maybe they wouldn't talk to me either. I just wanted a place where I could be myself and not have to worry if people liked me. I didn't like who I was at that age. I didn't like what I looked like or how I felt, so out of place and uncomfortable in my own skin. Sometimes just being me felt like an utter humiliation (and sometimes it still does). When would I get it together once and for all?

Now that I'm a grown woman looking back on that experience, I see that I was simply looking for a place to call home. I realize now that the world can be a difficult place where we feel we have to wear masks, put on a good show, and take care to hide our weaknesses. Even if we excel at sports, achieve at school, or have a million online friends, sometimes we feel overwhelmingly alone and we wonder if anyone really ever *sees* us. Will we ever find someone who understands our hearts and just loves us as we are? Will we ever be truly happy? It is as if our whole lives are a quest to find a place where we belong and a happiness in which we can rest.

We go to great lengths to pursue happiness by fitting in with other people. We take up common sports, interests, and fashions. We buy the same

things other people have. As we get older, we can easily put on the masks of the proper university degree, bank account balance, or politically correct service project.

And yet, our desire to fit in, belong, and be happy isn't the problem. God made us for communion and relationship, and God is ultimate happiness. Our struggle is that we spend a large portion of our lives seeking belonging and happiness in unfulfilling and often destructive ways.

Even by the end of my middle-school years, I sold out my friends by gossiping about them or leading them into dangerous situations like sneaking out at night or partying because I wanted to fit in and be liked by other people. Betraying my friends or breaking the rules my parents set up for me never brought me lasting happiness, though—it only brought me sorrow and trouble. So what is this desire for belonging and happiness that keeps rising up in our hearts?

I find politics and pop culture to be fascinating, and I can often be found listening to talk shows or the radio while out for a walk or a drive. Some time ago, I was watching a talk show debate on a news channel, and one of the guests said something I will never forget. He was talking about how American citizens are very ignorant of the foundations of our country and are therefore ignorant of what it really means to be American. The guest said, *"If we don't*

*know where we came from and where we are going, we will be easily manipulated.*" This profound remark can easily be applied to the spiritual life.

If we are honest with ourselves, we can see that something is amiss within our hearts and in society at large. We don't seem to know where we came from and we have no idea where we are going. We are very confused amidst all the voices of the world that tell us that happiness lies in acquiring possessions, wealth, and popularity; and these same voices often try to push God out of the picture. They say that God sucks the fun out of everything and that true freedom exists in doing whatever we want, however we want.

Yet something doesn't add up. Today's American society is vastly more affluent than the rest of the world. Untold pleasures are within reach of all of our fingertips. So why is suicide one of the leading causes of death for people ages fifteen to fifty-four?<sup>1</sup> Why do people seem to be more violent, restless, and addicted than ever? No matter how much stuff or status we acquire, it never seems to satisfy the deepest yearnings of our hearts. We long for more than material possessions and passing sexual encounters that leave the heart broken and empty. Isn't there more to life than this? There is, and we can find the answer we are looking for in the life of Jesus Christ.



Have you ever wondered why Jesus wasn't confused about who he was? (He didn't freak out in the lunch line over his lack of friends, or use people for his own pleasure.) How was he so comfortable with himself that he could joyfully endure ridicule, misunderstandings, sufferings, and ultimately crucifixion? Why didn't he bend to conform to the opinions of other people as we so often do or feel sorry for himself when things didn't go his way? The gospels reveal that Jesus touched and healed lepers (Mt 8:3), ate with unsavory sinners (Mt 9:10), and encountered bitter opposition from the powerful people of his time (Mt 12:14). Why was Jesus so free to love and speak the truth? Because *he knew who he was*. Breathe that in for one second. *He knew who he was*. Jesus lived his entire life from his true identity.

Jesus knew he was the beloved Son of God. He knew where he came from and where he was going. As broken humans, you and I often base our identity on what other people think about us. Jesus' identity was based not on the passing opinions of other people but on the eternal foundation of God the Father. Jesus shows us by the way he lived his life how a beloved child of God can live in our world. And we share the same identity as Jesus: we, too, are children of God. The answers to the questions of who we are, where we came from, and where we are going, are actually quite simple.

*The Catechism of the Catholic Church* (the giant green book you might be using as a paperweight or a bug-killer) has a really helpful glossary in the back. If you look up *person, human*, you will find this concise but rich definition: “The human individual, made in the image of God; not some thing but some one, a unity of spirit and matter, soul and body, capable of knowledge, self-possession, and freedom, who can enter into communion with other persons—and with God” (CCC 893). That’s a lot to absorb right from the start. I will interpret this definition throughout the book, but I want to begin here to reveal the beauty of who we are as women and men in the secure plan of God.

The first part of the definition tells us that our deepest longing for belonging reflects the reality that every human being is made in the image and likeness of God (Gn 1:26). It is here that we find our true identity as children of God. Every person, no matter the circumstances of their conception or birth, is made in the image and likeness of God and is meant to live, love, and thrive. (You’ll learn later why the circumstances of one’s birth matters so much to me.) This simply means that your *being* is very good. You are made in the image and likeness of God. You are his son or daughter, and God doesn’t make mistakes or have accidents. He knows what he is doing at all times, and he is not surprised by anything.