

Introduction

Give me chastity and continence, but not yet!”¹ This was the prayer of a young man who had one of the most amazing conversion stories of all time and certainly one of the most influential. He was handsome, young and driven by his passions. He was a man of the world—desiring money, power, girls and fame. And he was so talented that he often got what he desired.

His name was Augustine. Born into a religiously divided household, his Catholic mother tried to instill faith and virtue into her son, but Augustine rejected her beliefs about God. Living a life of unabashed hedonism and licentiousness, he stole, swindled and conceived a son out of wedlock. One can imagine how much pain he must have caused his mother, but she refused to lose hope and found solace in prayer.

Augustine had a near-death experience that caused him to take a serious look at the meaning and purpose of life. He had many questions, and he wasn’t satisfied with the typical answers. He found himself yearning for something deeper, something more fulfilling, than the fleeting pleasures he’d

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been pursuing. The person and work of Jesus Christ attracted him.

Augustine's passions, however, still could erupt with seemingly uncontrollable power. While his spirit was becoming willing, his flesh remained weak. It took many years of struggle for him to make the firm and irrevocable decision to change his life.

Finally the partying was over. No longer would he give in to the illicit pleasures his body craved. No longer would he be a slave to lust. He would live for Christ and for Christ alone. Through the transforming grace of his heavenly Father, he found a new joy and happiness that went beyond his wildest expectations. In dying to himself he found true life, the eternal life of an adopted son of God.

Saint Augustine became one of the greatest bishops in the history of the Catholic Church and one of its most influential leaders and teachers. Recalling his struggles and conversion, he wrote the immortal words: "You have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you."²

Like Saint Augustine, many people today are searching for something more, something greater, something truly fulfilling. This book contains the accounts of young people, the authors included, who have found that something—truth, joy and fulfillment—in the Catholic Church. Some of us were raised Catholic, others were raised Protestant, and still others were raised without any religious formation at all. Yet the one thing that unites us is that the saving hand of Jesus Christ led us to a deep and bold love for his bride, the Catholic Church. We believe all that she teaches and

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professes. We confess her creed with our lips and strive to live out her morals in our lives.

These testimonies offer answers to many of the questions being hurled at today's young men and women—questions about life, death and eternity. Several of our contributors recount the “dark valleys” into which they meandered; some we identify by a pseudonymous first name because of the sensitive nature of their stories. Many contributors mention particular media that they found helpful in their search for the truth; we have included information about these and other materials in our “recommended resources” list at the back of the book.

For young Catholics who feel alone in their faith, let us assure you with the words of the great Pope John Paul II: “Be not afraid!” There are hundreds of thousands of young people just like you—young people who love Jesus and his Church. Don't give up when things grow difficult. Take life head-on and live for Christ.

And to parents and grandparents who have witnessed a loved one walking away from the Church, we also say, “Be not afraid.” Though the tragedy is real, and your hearts may be burdened with worry, do not lose hope, and never stop praying. Many young people are returning to the splendor of Catholicism through the power of your love, example and prayer.

In his first address as pope, Benedict XVI stated:

I have before my eyes...the testimony of Pope John Paul II. He leaves a Church that is more courageous, freer, more

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youthful. She is a Church which, in accordance with his teaching and example, looks serenely at the past and is not afraid of the future.... I will continue our dialogue, dear young people, the future and hope of the Church and of humanity, listening to your expectations in the desire to help you encounter in ever greater depth the living Christ, eternally young.³

We offer this book as a gift to the Church and to our “eternally young” Savior—not to draw attention to ourselves but rather to be a testament to God’s goodness and grace in our lives. For they are not just *our* stories; they are also *his* stories told through us.

—Chris Cuddy and Peter Ericksen

ONE

Madly in Love With Jesus

Father Donald Calloway

Being young is awesome! Yet do you still find yourself thirsty for meaning and purpose in life? What about real, hard-core, objective truth? Are you thirsty for that?

I bet you are. And guess what? I know where to find it, and I'll share it with you. *Be young and passionately Catholic!*

Huh?

Yeah, you read it right: *Be young and passionately Catholic*. You might be a little confused by this statement. How can “passionate” and “Catholic” go together?

Is there hope for us, living in a culture that constantly inundates us with consumerism, lust and religious pluralism? Definitely. There's always hope. Saint Paul said, “Where sin increased, grace abounded all the more” (Romans 5:20).

Trust me; I know. Before I fell madly in love with Jesus Christ and the Catholic Church, my life was full of youthful passions. I was heavily involved in drinking, drugs and

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pornography before I was a teenager. But wait, I'm just getting started.

My stepfather, an officer in the military, was stationed in Japan, so my family moved there when I was a teenager. I ran away from home at age fifteen, causing an international scene that led to my being kicked out of the country. Back in the United States, I dropped out of school and was forced to spend time in a drug rehabilitation center. At age eighteen I was thrown into jail during Mardi Gras, acquired a tattoo of the Grateful Dead and caught a venereal disease from somebody. I wore waist-length hair, funky clothes and earrings. I had a foul mouth and atheistic beliefs.

You get the picture: I was a pretty bad dude. I was lost and radically confused. Young? Yes. Happy and full of hope? Not even.

I exhausted the pleasures of the world in my hunger for fulfillment. I drank of every illicit pleasure the world extended to me, and I came up dry. The sweetness our culture offers left a bitter taste in my mouth and an emptiness in my soul. Little did I know the plan God had for my life.

My heart longed for something more. I desperately wanted to find a cause to believe in. I craved a purpose for my life that would transform my seemingly meaningless existence into true, everlasting happiness. I desired something that extends beyond this chaotic, temporal world. I desired something eternal.

At the age of twenty I hit rock bottom. I had nothing, and I was nothing. And that's when God revealed himself to me. When I had nothing to live for, he was my only hope.

Father Donald Calloway

He was the Father I had always had but never knew I needed.

It was a late night at our home in Norfolk, Virginia. In despair and boredom I picked up a book from my parents' shelf. It was about apparitions of the Blessed Virgin Mary. My parents had converted to Catholicism several years earlier, but I had remained unimpressed and unaffected by their newfound faith. This book caught my attention, however. I had never heard of such things before.

Forgetting all of my problems, fears and inner pain, I began reading. I finished the book by early morning, and my life was forever changed. No longer was I willing to be a slave of the flesh and passions of this world. From now on I would live under the lordship of Jesus Christ.

I was madly in love with Jesus, and I knew that I had to give my life completely to him. How could I turn away from such mercy and hope, from the reality that there actually is a God who loves me so radically that he suffered and died for me? Everything I had been searching for in life—purpose, happiness and peace—were to be found in knowing Jesus Christ. Only he could satisfy me.

As time went on, however, I was faced with a difficult situation: How was I supposed to know what Jesus wanted me to believe about serious moral issues like contraception, abortion, euthanasia and homosexuality? After all, many of these things aren't addressed explicitly in the Bible. To whom could I turn to find the answers to life's most challenging issues?