

Returning to the Faith

By Anthony Chiarella

I was raised Catholic, but in my early teens our family fell away from going to church. It wasn't till I turned 18, and working a summer job in Edmonton at the city's annual festival called the 'Klondike Days' in 1979 that the faith of my upbringing got re-awakened.

During lunch-break one day, after I had picked up something to eat in the food pavilion, I proceeded to exit the building out a door different from the one I had entered, where I came upon a table with literature on it, and people standing around. A woman there, seeing I was looking, handed me a little blue paperback book. It was the "Gospel of John" in an easy-to-read version of the bible called *The Good News for Modern Man*. I took the book, slipped it in my bag, and headed out the exit. I don't recall any conversion. Once outside, I found a grassy place in the shade to sit, started to eat my sandwich, and opened the little blue book. It was a noisy, busy location where I began reading about this man called Jesus. I became deeply drawn into the story. At the end of my break, I earmarked the page, put the book in my bag and returned to work, not daring to tell anyone what I was reading. Secretly, however, I remember being excited about my next break so I could return to my little blue book.

A year later, at the public high school I attended in Winnipeg, a Christian organization called "Athletes in Action" were invited to make a presentation in the gymnasium to the student body. While the athletes kept our attention through displays of basketball skills, they would stop once in a while and talk about this man called Jesus. That got my attention, and not so much their athleticism. Over the course of their presentation, cards were handed out that invited anyone to write their name and phone number on if they wished to be called about anything they had heard. I did just that. But, I was not really expecting anything to become of it.

Several days later I was called by a young fellow named Darrell who invited me to coffee at a nearby A & W restaurant. I don't recall that conversation anymore, but I did start going to the youth group meetings of his Baptist church. What struck me about these Baptist youth was how they were "high" on Jesus, and not on drugs, alcohol and the "party" culture. With them, a whole new world opened to me that I had never experienced before. I started attending Sunday services, studying the bible, praying, and participating in their many activities. It was exciting.

During that year of involvement with the Baptists, I was in first-year University taking various courses in the liberal arts, including a class in the history of art. It exposed me to the significant role that Christianity and the Church have played in the history of Western culture. Also during that year, I wandered into a Cole's Bookstore one day and bought a book on medieval philosophy, something I knew nothing about.

While a student, I worked part-time at the YMCA as a locker-room attendant, and would often read my art books at the counter when things got slow. One day a customer, an older man named Ted, asked me what I was studying. I told him it was about art and Christianity. He noticed by my name tag that I had an Italian last name and asked if I were Catholic. At first, I didn't know what to say, but I did tell him that I grew up Catholic. He asked me if I'd like to go to mass with him at St. Mary's Cathedral downtown. Going to that mass reintroduced me to the richness of the Catholic faith, after being away many years. As I attended mass, and other Catholic events with Ted, I kept up my activities with the Baptists. But, I could feel inside myself a deepening crisis of faith, as I was keeping my Catholic activities a secret from my Baptist Church friends. I knew that a choice had to be made, and I made it in the summer of 1981. When I discussed my decision in favour of the Catholics with my Baptist pastor and friends, it met with grave disapproval. In their eyes, I was abandoning the Christian faith.

I started going to mass at Our Lady of Perpetual Help parish in Charleswood on my own, where I knew no one. It was a foreign experience from the socialization I had received from the Baptists. In many ways, I knew that I will have to re-learn many aspect of the Christian faith from the Catholic perspective. To assist me in this task, I was directed to Stephanchew's Church Goods store downtown for reading material. There I purchase a few important texts to my development as a Catholic Christian: the reader's edition of the Jerusalem Bible, which version was being used in the Catholic Lectionary; the Jerome Biblical Commentary; and the documents of

Vatican Council II from the 1960s. With these, along with my study of art history, and reading in philosophy, I discovered a very different world of Christianity than what the Baptists had taught me. I do thank them, however, for making the person of Jesus really come alive for me, and for stressing the importance of reading the Bible, God's Word, myself.

In the early 80s I investigated the idea of studying for the priesthood at the suggestion of various people, including some from Our Lady of Perpetual Help. When it became obvious that this was not going to be my path in life, a general sense of aimlessness set in about what I am to do with myself. That contributed to a feeling of estrangement from the people of my parish. Eventually, I stopped going to mass, and participated very little in Catholic events. Nevertheless, I kept up my Catholic and philosophical studies.

In 1985 I was invited to a Catholic young people's event called TEC one weekend. When Saturday morning arrived for me to go, I didn't. But, someone from the event got in their car and drove to my place to get me. Reluctantly I went. To my surprise, I had a great time. At the end of the weekend, we were encouraged to exchange names and phone numbers with someone we had not met. I wasn't making any efforts to do this. Then, a young woman approached me and we made the exchange. Her name was Teresita. I wasn't expecting anything to come of it. Several days later, to my surprise, I received a call from her. We talked on the phone a bit, then went out for coffee, and many more times again, along with other activities, where over time we fell in love and got married in 1987 at Christ the King Parish.

During these early years of marriage, I still didn't go to mass, continuing to feel estranged from Catholic social gatherings. But privately, Teresita prayed. We lived in Fort Rouge just off Corydon Avenue, not far from St. Ignatius Parish. Teresita would go to church on her own. But, she would ask me every Sunday if I wanted to go. Declining, I would spend my time lounging around till her return. It was one Good Friday, as Teresita recalls, that I said I was going to mass with her. That was the turning point for me. It became my return to "faith," my return to mass, and to being with Catholics again. We eventually became "greeters" at the 9:00 AM Sunday mass, which made me feel like I was really part of parish life.

In 1995 we moved to St. Vital, where we now live, and had to decide on going to church at either Christ the King Parish or St. Timothy's. It was the attractive design of St. Timothy's architecture, mass being celebrated in-the-round, the beautiful symbolism of the baptismal pool and font in the narthex, among other things, that attracted us to this parish. As well, for me, it was also the cloakroom. It reminded me of an important aspect of my time with the Baptists: people were expected to take off their coats, hang around, socialize, form friendships, and become a community of brothers and sisters in Christ. That I saw taking place at St. Timothy's, and it is what we have experienced this past 25 years while raising our daughter Allegra here. St. Timothy's has become our spiritual family and home. Our first involvement was as Eucharistic ministers. Then, due to my art background, I was invited to join "AWE" – the Art in the Worship Environment committee. Over the years both of us have become involved in various aspects of parish life as the needs have presented themselves. We both think of it as a Christian privilege to serve. I have found being a Eucharistic minister an especial blessing since it allows me distribute Holy Communion, Christ's Body and Blood, to my brothers and sisters of faith. For sure a beautiful thing we have as Catholic Christians.

It took time for my life-long interests in the visual arts to show signs of my deepening Christian faith through works of art in paintings, stained glass, and wood carving. St. Timothy Parish has many of my pieces, as well as other churches around Winnipeg, including a couple schools, and many private homes. The turning point for me as an artist is the painting entitled "Man of Sorrows," of Christ carrying a wooden beam across his shoulders on the way to execution. (It is owned by St. Timothy Parish.) I painted it during Lent of 1997 as a spiritual exercise, and it changed me as an artist. After that work, many more pieces have emerged from my studio that celebrate Christ's presence in our world. It's a message our society needs to hear as it secularizes and empties itself of spiritual meaning, leaving a void at the center of people's lives – a "hole" that only God can fill.

It has been, and continues to be, a long journey of faith for me these past many decades, one that I have to thank that Christian woman for, who put that little blue book in my hand in 1979.