

My Personal History: Mary Ann Collins - A Former Catholic Nun

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February 2002

Revised May 2002

I joined the Roman Catholic Church because I was looking for God. I entered the convent because I wanted to be close to God and to serve Him with radical devotion. But it wasn't until after I left Catholicism that I found the kind of relationship with God that I had been looking for all along. You can read about it in my poems.

My pastor and my father have both advised me not to give out personal information. This biography is an attempt to share my heart and my life within the framework of their advice.

I started out as a "liberal" intellectual who was prejudiced against Christianity. I had been taught to believe that Christians were gullible people who were either stupid or uneducated. I was basically an agnostic who didn't know or care whether God existed. For me, the idea of God was irrelevant. I looked to science, psychology, and politics to save mankind from its problems.

During my senior year in high school, I fell in love with a young man who was a devout Catholic. That was my first encounter with someone who strongly believed in God. I may have met Christians before that, but they didn't make their Christian beliefs known to me.

This young man prayed. He loved God. He was a man of principle and integrity. His life was guided by his religious beliefs. He had hope. He had a kind of compassion and respect for people that I had not seen before. There was something different about him. I didn't know what it was, but whatever it was, I wanted it. I figured that it had something to do with his religion, so I started taking instruction in Catholicism. The young man moved overseas and I didn't see him again, but I continued studying Catholicism.

During my first year of college I majored in biology. I also studied French and Latin. I went to a local priest every week for instruction. Under his direction, I studied many books including the "Baltimore Catechism" and biographies of well known modern Catholics. This was in the days of the Latin Mass, before there was a formal catechumen program. When I returned home for the summer, I found another priest to continue my instruction.

I was unable to return to college the following year. For several years I continued to study with that priest, while working to earn money for college. The priest gave me more books to study including a series of booklets on

Scripture. (There was a booklet for each book of the Bible. On each page, the top half of the page contained Scripture and the bottom half contained a Catholic commentary about those portions of Scripture.)

My job was close to a Catholic Church, and I went to Mass during lunch hour. I prayed for God to give me faith. I was praying even though I wasn't sure that God existed. My very first prayer was, "God, if You're out there, show me." I didn't take communion because I wasn't a Catholic. I only said as much of the Apostles Creed as I actually believed. It was a long time before I could even say the opening phrase, "I believe in God".

After several years I was baptized a Roman Catholic. Soon afterwards, my brother also became a Catholic. His instruction was through group classes. I attended those classes with him. I was hungry to learn anything that I could about God.

I went to a Catholic college and majored in Religious Education. My classes on Scripture taught a lot of modern "higher criticism," and some of my Religious Education teachers taught things that seemed to be contrary to the official teachings of the Catholic Church. I found a conservative priest and I checked teachings out with him to see if they were the official teaching of the Catholic Church. Because I no longer trusted the teachings of the Religious Education department, I changed majors.

When I entered the convent, I was careful to choose a conservative one which followed the official teachings of the Catholic Church. My training for religious life included studying the documents of the Second Vatican Council, other books relating to Catholic doctrine, and biographies of well known saints.

I spent over two years as a postulant and a novice. This was a time of testing for the leaders of the convent, and for me, to decide whether or not I should make vows. My mother superior had some questions about my calling, and she and the leadership decided that I should not remain in the convent. I left the convent on good terms and have occasionally been in contact with the sisters since then.

Our mother superior was very careful about which priests she allowed to say Mass at our convent. We had priests who were loyal to God and to the Catholic Church. They believed the Bible. They were faithful men.

When I left the convent and went to live with my parents, I couldn't find priests like that. The local priests seemed to have little faith and little loyalty, either to God or to the Catholic Church. I remember one Mass where the homily (a short sermon) was so distressing that I left in tears. I stayed outside, weeping. But then I went back in, in order to take communion. I tried every Catholic church in town, but I couldn't find a good priest.

I vividly remember a priest who spoke about Luke 7:38-50. This was the

time when Jesus ate in the home of a Pharisee and a woman came and wept and washed Jesus' feet with her tears, and dried them with her hair, and anointed them with ointment. The Pharisee was critical. Jesus told him that he had not washed Jesus' feet, but the woman did. He had not greeted Jesus with a kiss, but the woman kissed his feet. The Catholic priest said that this event must not have really happened, because it would be rude for a guest to say something like that to his host, and Jesus would never have been rude. This illustrates an attitude towards Scripture which I encountered with a number of priests. It was very distressing.

Meanwhile, my parents had become Christians. They had joined a little Methodist church where the pastor believed the Bible and loved the people. Because the local Catholic churches were distressing, I started doing the splits. I went to early morning Mass (out of duty) and then I attended the Methodist church. When my parents joined another Scripturally based Protestant church, I followed them there, while still attending early morning Mass on Sundays. I did the splits for years.

I made myself go to Mass out of duty. But I went to my parents' church eagerly. I learned exciting things about the Bible there. I sang songs that stirred my soul. I took classes that made me more and more hungry for Scripture. I got to know people who were enthusiastic about God. I learned that Biblical principles really work, and that they make a significant practical difference in real life situations.

As I learned more about the Bible, I began to realize that some Catholic teachings are contrary to Scripture. This was disturbing, but I kind of pushed those contradictions to the back of my mind and didn't deal with them. They made me uneasy, but I wasn't emotionally able to handle the idea that there might be something wrong with the Catholic Church.

My brother was a devout Catholic. He assisted the priests at Mass for many years. He lived several hours' drive away from us. We had a tradition that on Easter and Christmas, he would come visit and we would go to Midnight Mass together.

One Christmas, at Midnight Mass, the priest taught that the Christmas story as presented in the Bible is basically a pious fairy tale to make people feel good, but it has nothing to do with reality. My brother got so angry that he wanted to jump up and shout, "Are we here to celebrate it or to debate it?"

The next day, we went to church with our parents. The pastor there told us that Daniel had been in charge of the "wise men" of Babylon (magi). Therefore, they knew about Baalam's prophecy that the King of the Jews would be heralded by a star. Their religion included watching the stars for signs. So when they saw the special star, they realized that it signaled the coming of this special King of the Jews. Also, one of their functions was to decide who the valid king was if there was a controversy about it. So when they came to confirm that Jesus was truly the King of the Jews, they were

fulfilling their official function.

Needless to say, the contrast was striking. And troubling. I did a lot of praying after that. By the following Easter, I had left the Catholic Church and joined my parents' church.

I didn't know what to tell my brother and his wife, because they were coming to visit at Easter, and I did not want to go to Midnight Mass with them. We had a long, awkward telephone conversation. Then I finally told them. They started laughing. They had also left the Catholic Church, and were in the process of visiting different churches, trying to find a church home.

There was a prayer that had a major impact on my life, but I don't remember the exact words. When I prayed it, I was crying and I didn't know why. And afterwards, things were different, but it's hard to put into words. The prayer was something like this:

"Jesus, I want to know You. Please reveal Yourself to me and make the Bible come alive for me. I want to be clean and start over again. Please forgive my sins. Wash them away and set me free. I want to live right. Please change my heart. Help me love what You love, and turn away from things that displease You. You know what's best for me. I want to do things Your way. Please be the Lord of my life. Teach me to love the way You love. Help me be faithful to You. Thank You for loving me and for hearing this prayer. Thank You for being my Lord and my Savior."

Since then I have been struggling with issues related to Catholicism. The papers that I have written have emerged from that struggle.

In addition to being a former nun, I am also a widow. My husband and I were very close, and his death introduced me to a level of emotional pain that I didn't know was possible. The articles which I have written about finding God's comfort during times of adversity were born out of my own experience.

My testimony is not unusual. A number of former Catholics have written me sharing how they found a living, personal relationship with God when they became born-again, Bible-believing, Protestants.

Some ex-Catholics read my testimony and wrote to me, wanting to be sure that Jesus Christ is my Lord and my Savior. (He is.) An ex-nun befriended me. Two former priests gave me wise counsel. Other ex-Catholic friends have shared their hearts, their wisdom, and valuable information. I am deeply grateful for these people. May the Lord bless them for their kindness.

POEM

Your Word brings life to save my soul.

Your Truth brings light to make me whole.

Your perfect love casts out my fears,
Comforts me, and dries my tears.
I'm in the shadow of Your wings
Where you teach my heart to sing.
Safe and secure from all alarm,
Your faithful love keeps me from harm.
I will bless You all my days.
You fill my heart with songs of praise.

NUNS AND NOVICES

I was in religious life for a little over two years. I was a novice but I never made vows. A novice is someone who has entered a religious order and has been given a habit. He or she undergoes training and religious exercises in preparation for taking vows. (There are novice monks as well as novice nuns.)

Some people have asked me why I call myself a former nun when I never made vows. According to "The Catholic Encyclopedia," if a novice has been accepted by a religious order (which I was) and has been given a religious habit (which I wore), then he or she is a monk or a nun in the broad sense of the term. [Note 1] So I refer to myself as a former nun.

WHAT I BELIEVE

Some people have asked me what I believe. In describing my beliefs, I am going to avoid technical terms. I am also going to avoid the issues about which different Protestant churches disagree, such as church government, form of worship, details about the Second Coming of Christ, and the relationship between predestination and free will.

I believe many things which are not in this summary. If I tried to go into them all, this would become too long and cumbersome. I am only going to mention some key areas. If I fail to mention something which you consider to be a foundational Christian doctrine, that does not necessarily mean that I don't believe it. It just means that I didn't mention it.

I believe in the three "solas" of the Protestant Reformation. We are saved by faith alone (not faith plus works). We are saved by faith in Jesus alone (not Jesus plus something else). Our rule of faith is the Bible alone (not the Bible plus tradition or other writings).

Saving faith is demonstrated by loving and obeying God, and by doing good works. These are the results of salvation, not the cause of it.

Christianity works for all Christians under all circumstances. There are some countries where Christians are severely persecuted. In these countries, Bibles are scarce, and Christians are not able to meet publicly. Some Christians have been put in prison for their faith, without Bibles, and often without being able to see fellow Christians. If Christians do not have Bibles to guide them and encourage them, then God has other ways of guiding them and strengthening them. God is not limited by our circumstances.

It is valuable to have Bibles and pastors and teachers and church meetings. If they are available, then we should benefit from them as much as possible. But if those things are not available, then God is powerful enough to enable us to live godly lives without them. Jesus promised us that the Holy Spirit would guide us into all truth (John 16:13) and teach us "all things" (John 14:26). God is able to keep us from falling. (Jude 1:24)

I believe in the authority and the accuracy of the Bible. I believe that it is the inspired Word of God. Jesus said that the Father showed Him what to say. (John 12:49) Surely our God is capable of doing the same thing for the men who wrote the books of the Bible.

Through the Bible, God shows us His nature and His character. He shows us what we should believe and how we should live. We need to test everything against Scripture. We also need to ask God to help us understand Scripture, to reveal Himself to us through the Bible, and to help us live according to His Word.

Ordinary people can understand the Bible. We don't have to rely on experts or church officials. The basic principles are simple enough for a child to understand. But the Bible is so rich that a brilliant scholar can spend a lifetime studying it and still not understand everything in it.

I believe that every Christian can have a personal relationship with God. We all have direct access to Him. We don't have to rely on professionals, church officials, and other special people.

I believe in the Atonement. Jesus died to save us from our sins. I believe in the Resurrection. Jesus literally rose from the dead and He now has a glorified body. He is in Heaven with the Father, and He is interceding for us. I believe in the Second Coming. Jesus will come back again.

I believe that at the end of all things, we will all stand before the judgment seat of Jesus Christ. (2 Corinthians 5:10; John 5:22; Romans 14:10) Talking about judgment is not popular these days, but it's in the Bible. When Judgment Day comes, we will want to be numbered with the Redeemed, the Saved, those whose sins have been forgiven. Even then, our works will be tested by fire. (1 Corinthians 3:11-15)

I believe in the Trinity. There is only one God. But there is the Father, the Son (Jesus), and the Holy Spirit. I believe in the Incarnation. Jesus Christ is truly God and truly man. Jesus was miraculously conceived by God. Mary was still a virgin when Jesus was born.

I don't understand how this works. But even the Apostle Paul had things that he didn't understand. Paul often spoke about mysteries that are beyond our understanding.

Even in the physical world, there are many things which we can't understand. According to the laws of aerodynamics, hummingbirds and bumble bees should not be able to fly. But they do. Scientists are studying them in hopes of gaining new understanding about aerodynamics, and developing new forms of aircraft. There is an animal called a platypus which is warm blooded, lays eggs, and nurses its babies. It looks and acts like a cross between a mammal and a lizard. Everything is made of atoms. Atoms have a nucleus of protons and neutrons, and there are electrons that go around the nucleus. The protons are positive. Neutrons are magnetically neutral. And electrons are negative. Have you ever tried to take two magnets and hold the positive sides of them together? They push each other away. Yet here we have these protons all together in the nucleus of the atom. What holds them together? Scientists don't know.

Life is full of mysteries. The Trinity and the Incarnation are two of them.

The Atonement is another mystery. I believe that Jesus did it. The Bible gives me some understanding of why we desperately needed to have Him do it for us. But I cannot understand how He could love us enough to do it. How could Jesus love us so much that He was willing to be tortured to death for us? Especially when He knew that most people would not respond to Him and would not appropriate the salvation that He paid such a high price for. How could God the Father love us so much that he endured the agony of watching his beloved Son be crucified? God's love is beyond my comprehension.

I believe that faith in Jesus Christ is the only way that we can be saved. In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus prayed to the Father, begging His Father to spare Him from having to drink the cup of suffering. (Matthew 26:39; 26:42) If there was some other way to save us, don't you think that the Father would have told Jesus? Don't you think that Jesus and the Father both intensely wanted to find some other way to save us? But there was no other way. Jesus had to go through the indescribable agony of mocking, shame, abandonment, physical torture, and death in order to save us. And He was willing to do it for us.

If there was some other way, then why did Jesus suffer for us? If good works, or being nice, or sacraments, or devotion to Mary, or good intentions, or wearing the brown scapular, or non-Christian religions, or anything else would do the job, then Jesus didn't need to suffer for us. Nobody in their right

mind would go through that kind of suffering if it wasn't absolutely necessary. And no loving father would allow his son to go through it if it could be avoided. There is no other way. That's why Jesus died for us.

I have a Biblical world view. I believe in a literal heaven and hell. I believe that the devil is real. I believe that angels and demons are real. And I believe that God intervenes in the lives of individuals and of nations in response to prayer. I believe that the healings and miracles and supernatural events of the Bible are real. They really happened. God did it then, and if He wants to, He can do it now. (If you want to see an example, read "God's Smuggler" by Brother Andrew. God supernaturally protected Brother Andrew when he was smuggling Bibles into Communist countries. I have also read and heard accounts of God supernaturally protecting modern Christians who were being persecuted.)

I live in America. Many people here no longer believe in a Biblical world view. It is interesting that two things are happening at the same time. Many modern Christians are abandoning their belief in the supernatural things which are described in the Bible. At the same time, belief in occult supernatural things is growing rapidly and is becoming more and more mainstream. Books, movies, and TV shows are full of it. Some colleges have courses in goddess worship, witchcraft, spell casting, and other occult things. The American military has Wiccan "chaplains".

But God can use all things, even the occult. I know a man who saw the movie "The Exorcist". He also read the book. It persuaded him that the devil is real. He decided that if the devil is real, then God must also be real. So he started reading the Bible to find out about God. This man eventually became a strong Christian.

GENERAL COMMENTS

I want you to be able to check out what I have said for yourself. You probably don't have the books I used as sources. Therefore, I have found a number of articles on the Internet which give much of the same information. I have done my best to reach fair and accurate conclusions based on reliable sources of information. But I'm only human. I have my failings. We all do. I may have made some mistakes.

But it's not about me. It's about you and the truth. You can check out this material for yourself and come to your own conclusions. And you can ask God to show you the truth. He is the only one who has the big picture. He is the only one who really understands what is going on.

So in the final analysis, it's between you and God. It doesn't depend on me at all. My role is just to introduce you to some information. You and God can take it from there.

THE HISTORY OF MY WEB SITE

Some Protestant friends of mine asked me to give them information about apparitions of Mary. I did research on the subject, as well as drawing from my own personal experience. (I was devoted to Mary and influenced by the apparitions of Lourdes and Fatima. I wore a scapular and a Miraculous Medal, prayed the rosary, and participated in special services honoring Mary.) I wrote a paper for my friends entitled, "Mary Worship? A Study of Catholic Practice and Doctrine". (Marian devotions and my involvement with them are described in that article.)

My family suggested that other people might be interested in the paper. So I created a web site for that one paper. People wrote to me about the article and about Catholicism in general. I wrote more articles in response to their questions and comments.

CORRESPONDENCE

I welcome correspondence. However, I get a lot of mail and I'm not good at remembering names. So please forgive me if I forget your name, or don't remember that we corresponded before. Also, occasionally somebody's letter may "fall through the cracks". I don't always have time to respond to letters right away, and they may get lost in the crowd when a bunch of new mail comes in. So if I don't respond to you, please try me again.

If you are disturbed by some of the things which I have written, I understand how you feel. I am disturbed by them, too. I was a devout Catholic for many years, and strongly loyal to the Catholic Church. It is painful for me to read about these things and to write about them. But we need the truth, even when it is painful.

If you disagree with me so strongly that you want to write me an angry letter, please feel free to do so. I understand where you are coming from. However, I may not reply. But I will pray for you.

I no longer get involved in doctrinal debates. I've spent many long hours doing that and enough is enough. Time is precious and I have other things to do with my life.

FOOTNOTES

1. "Novice" in the 1913 edition of "The Catholic Encyclopedia," Volume XI. This article is available on-line. The term "novice" refers to both monks and nuns who go through a period of training and preparation. In Section II, "Juridical Condition," the article states that a novice in a religious order is a "regular" in the widest sense of the word. (A "regular" is a technical term for a monk or a nun.) <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/11144a.htm>

NOTE: The article often speaks of “he” when modern usage would be to say “he or she”. Section I, “Definition and Requirements” specifically mentions nuns. And it gives instructions regarding married women who want to become nuns. So the article is about both novice monks and novice nuns.

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