

## A Manchild Goes to God

I remember as a child participating in the rituals of the Catholic church mostly in the company of my mother, for my father at that point was not a Christian. It was an exciting and mysterious process for a little boy. But what I remember of those early years was my child-like devotion and the elementary mental awareness of a great and majestic God who was way up there far from me but powerful enough to fill the church building or my parents bedroom where we knelt around the bed and prayed the traditional prayers of the rosary beads. Of course I did not understand these prayers, but what I did sense was that this was an intimate family moment in communion with God and the church.

As I grew older and into adolescence my fascination with and attachment to the Catholic Mass and other rituals developed. I knew my mother loved the church and God and was devoted to prayer. She also expressed her hopes in me that maybe some day I would become a priest and thereby assure my place in heaven. I sensed in her the early stirrings of pride in me and a perception that I was special. Of course I loved that and discovered that her sisters, whom I loved and who loved me, held the same religious faith and a couple of my aunts also had hopes that I would become a priest.

In my senior year in high school I did decide that I would enter the Catholic seminary in Houston. I had the impression that I would be carrying on my shoulders the hopes of the clergy and many family and church friends in my local parish. In retrospect I realize that at 18 years of age some of my motivations were selfish in that I cherished the attention, respect, and delight of others including the local community. I also had a budding faith and yearned for visions and personal transformation. Especially in that first and second year in the seminary I was on a kind of spiritual high and was excited about what I was learning in my classes. Although I had close friends in the seminary, after about 3 years, I began to feel more and more alienated from the men there and had a few very negative experiences with the priests who taught me. And by the fourth year of the eight year course of study to become a priest, my feelings of alienation and my own disappointment in my moral development led me to the decision that I needed to leave the seminary. Surprisingly now as I look back, I was never aware of the importance of having a personal relationship with Jesus or even with God. There was always a strong conviction that God was way up there and I was way way down here. The Catholic Church itself was at the forefront of my thinking and awareness, more than any awareness of an intimate connection between me and God. Ironically my intense and successful study of philosophy in the seminary eventually placed me in my mind and led me away from my heart.

Upon leaving the seminary I had several experiences of rejection by church officials and bitter disappointment especially by my mother. I started to feel apart from my family and the church. My mental and emotional sense of separation from God and the church, became intense and pervasive. In those years immediately following my departure from the seminary I was in my early twenties, and I lost myself in worldly pursuits of money, physical pleasures, material possessions, and in the pursuit of a career in the social services. In spite of a life of dissipation I knew I wanted to find a job or profession of helping people. Perhaps I thought that this would also help me find myself. I achieved a bachelor's degree, went to LSU for graduate studies to be a social worker. I realized I was not suited for this work, and eventually received a master's degree with an emphasis in criminology and the social sciences from a university in Huntsville, Texas.

I had always been interested in teaching and leading, even as a child in our neighborhood. And eventually I got a job teaching in a high school in the Houston area, moving on to college teaching there until I got a job at El Centro community college in Dallas. I had started dating during my graduate studies and finally convinced a young woman named Helen Elizabeth, to take the leap and marry me at age 27. Helen had studied to be a nun and her family was very Catholic, so we had that spiritual and religious orientation in our backgrounds. Although we had very different temperaments, we were a perfect match. We were and still are deeply in love after almost 50 years of marriage. We have had many ups and downs in our marriage but eventually we both got back into the Catholic church in the Dallas area and had several extremely meaningful and enriching marriage and spiritual enrichment experiences in the church. We also became leaders in our church. These wonderful and growth-filled experiences as well as a mutual desire for spiritual growth have been part and parcel of the cement that has held our marriage together for five decades.

My journey into the arms of my beloved Papa God has been twisted and rocky. Although Helen and I were very involved in a Catholic church in Lancaster Texas, eventually we left the church due to serious conflicts with and disappointments in clergy and church officials. Also hurts and spiritual injuries suffered in the Catholic church have kept Helen and I from being able to again safely and comfortably enter the doors of that denomination as participant members. Neither of us reject the rich Christian heritage we received as Catholics, nor do we think God wants that. We have forgiven those at whose hands we suffered, but we have not and cannot forget what they said and did.

Over these years of separation from the Catholic fold I have sought spiritual fulfillment from Native American spiritual practices, and eastern religious orientations such as Buddhism and Taoism, and other churches such as Unity and Unitarianism, although I have never joined those religions. I learned many wonderful and helpful things in these sojourns, but eventually I realized that they were just not enough for me.

I had just about decided to abandon religion altogether when a close friend invited me to come to church with her back in 2013. It was a non-denominational church in Mansfield Texas and it was there that I encountered men and women who loved Jesus and the Bible and who sang joyfully. I had never been around men in particular that spoke of their relationship with Jesus, who quoted the Bible, and obviously had a rich and vibrant faith. I came to love them. I became part of a small men's Bible Study group and got close to several men who were forthright and open about their spiritual journeys with God and Jesus Christ. I dove into the Scriptures and loved the preacher and especially the lively and spirited music of that church. On August 31, 2015 I surrendered to Jesus Christ and accepted him as my Lord and Savior. I was baptized and when I came out of the water I dripped with grace and joy and that was the moment of my rebirth and regeneration. I felt the presence of the Holy Spirit surround my whole being, mind and body. That was the moment that I was saved at a whole new level from my own egotism and sinful mistakes. That was the moment I knew I was redeemed by Jesus Christ and I again felt spiritually whole and in love with God.

I referred to myself in the title of this piece as a manchild because for my entire life, there was a little boy inside me who wanted to embrace and be embraced by God, who wanted a brother and Lord who would walk hand and hand, shoulder to shoulder and heart to heart with me. After six years at that wonderful church where I was baptized and reborn, I realized that I wanted to go deeper, I wanted to fall --- in love--- in a long term relationship with God. I wanted to dive deeply into the Word and to be with others who wanted to do the same thing on a regular basis. That is when my friend Jim Stacy led me to 1<sup>st</sup> Free Will Baptist Church of Duncanville.

As I remember, I began attending this church around December 2018 or early in January 2019. In that time I have been welcomed with open arms and smiling faces, being impressed with the way that people called me by my name very soon after meeting me. It has taken me a while to adjust and become comfortable with the worship there as it is somewhat different from the non-denominational church where I was baptized and of course, very different from the Catholic churches I had attended much of my life, which is a good thing. I am impressed with several things about this church community and facility: I like the relative simplicity of the church building, furnishings, etc. I have thoroughly enjoyed the sermons which are deep, thoughtful and enjoyable to listen to and learn from. I appreciate the leadership and spirit of Pastor Kevin Williford as well as the deacons and other leaders in the church. And I love the emphasis on Scripture. I have especially enjoyed Sunday School which is properly named, for each Sunday I come into that classroom and I am schooled on the Scriptures. I am regularly humbled by the depth and breadth of knowledge of the Word of the teachers and participants. It is here that I am experiencing that deeper dive into the Word and the practices, values, and spirit of this loving Christian community that I yearned for in the previous church.

Above all, as a result of the many experiences I have had in the arms of this church community I am happily growing in my union with the Father and Jesus Christ. I am experiencing the infusion of the Holy Spirit in my writing. I love to write and I especially love writing when I am inspired. God is taking care of that for me.

So here I am, ready for membership in this church if they will have me and ready to serve as they, and God so desire. I am richly blessed and so very often feel absolutely full of grace there among those wondrous and dedicated disciples of Christ.