



## M Y R E V E R S I O N S T O R Y



MY EYES WERE NOT PREPARED TO SEE what my ears had failed to detect. Back home, clues like the jolting pings on the sheet metal over the neighbor's carport, or the rapid-fire whacks on my bedroom window at night, were tell tale signs of rain. But snow is completely different. Unlike rain, where visual confirmation is not necessary, snow has to be seen to know it's falling. And this is what led to my early-morning surprise.

When I went to sleep the previous night, I could see the familiar trappings of dorm life outside my window—the bikes locked to their posts, the cars parked with school decals, the clutter of art projects gone awry surrounding the dumpster. But as night fell, these disparate objects that dotted my landscape would soon be united under eight inches of white powder.

After completing a project due the next day for my drawing class, I drew the curtains and looked forward to some long anticipated shut-eye. Aside from the occasional screams from the other freshmen on the floors below, the night was uneventful.

In the morning, however, as I flung open the curtains of my third floor dorm room, all I could see before me was an infinite field of dazzling white mounds.

Snow is not prejudiced. It enveloped the college president's car as well as it covered Nickerson Hall's garbage bin. The myriad of individual bicycles seemed conjoined under a blanket of snow.

It reminded me of the smooth rolling South Florida sand dunes where my mother would take my older brother and me with beach umbrella and cooler in tow. But this sand was not hot, dry or brown, but rather, cold, wet, and white—and just as much fun, or so I was lead to believe by Charles Schultz.

As a native Floridian—born and bred—I had no guides for snow life. The only reference that cold November in 1989, was *A Charlie Brown Christmas*. This annual television favorite depicts the cartoon characters merrymaking in the snow. All members of the Peanuts Gang are seen cheering and laughing as they make snow angels, have snowball fights and catch snowflakes on their tongues. I could hardly wait to participate. Through the fogged-up window, I noticed some of my classmates running around in the new snow, leaving footprints similar to those my mom left as I followed her on the beach.

Too excited to change, I rushed downstairs in my shorts and t-shirt. I took great comfort in knowing that there were others who had never seen snow either. The art school I attended drew students from all over the world, and I was playing in the snow with two girls from Jamaica, a boy from Puerto Rico and another from Bermuda. Despite our different accents and assorted skin colors, we could collectively be targeted as snow virgins because we were all dressed in inadequate attire and were way too excited over the season's first snowfall.

After a few minutes, the lawn was packed with new playmates. We were all laughing and screaming like children. It was like an enormous white sandbox, whose sides had burst and contents spilled into the streets.

I had regressed to my childhood. All I needed was Snoopy, Linus or Woodstock to make the scene complete. Play *Peanuts Theme* here. Now, I hate to speak ill of the dearly departed, but Charles Schultz lied. My guide did not prepare me for the ensuing scenario.

It seems that if a certain amount of pressure is applied to the right type of snow and it falls into the wrong hands, a misadventure can occur.

Evidently, tightly packed, wet snow yields ice; transforming fluffy white balls into lethal projectiles. There's a fine line between innocent merrymaking and loss of consciousness. I guess those scenes hit the floor at the Schultz Studios. A New England local (who would later be one of my best friends) decided to throw a white cannonball at the Cuban neophyte.

I woke up in the nurse's office with an awful headache and blurred vision. They say I was out for just a few minutes but the memories would last a lifetime. As I regained my sight, I focused on a poster that was taped to the wall. "Non-denominational Bible Study. Monday Nights. 7PM. Upper Refectory." Little did I know that seeing that poster would change my life forever. It would mark the beginning of a journey, an often very painful one, that led me away from the Church of my youth, only to rediscover it again with a relentless fervor that has not subsided a quarter century later. That poster would give birth to a project that would combine all my God-given talents into an expression of his love that I hope will inspire faith in thousands.

I don't know what lead me to want to attend that Bible study. I was raised Catholic—baptism, first communion and confirmation—but my Faith never really interested me.

As a child, I remember using the back of the pew—where the missalettes and songbooks were kept—as a balcony. My Superman action figure would perch there and keep surveillance. He made sure nothing went wrong during Mass and would occasionally fly around and whack my older brother in the back of the head at some point after the Kyrie, but before the Responsorial Psalm—had to keep him guessing. It was Superman's job to keep the riff-raff in order. A generous chap, he always put mom's money into the collection basket.

In my late elementary and early high-school days, noon Mass on Sunday always seemed to conflict with my first real love—Miami Dolphins football. If the priest got a full head of steam and rattled on in his homily, I wouldn't get to a TV set until well into the second quarter. Unacceptable. We opted for the Saturday vigil Mass instead.

I went to Mass basically to please my mother. It was under an hour (on a good day) and it made her happy. No harm, no foul. Marino rules.

As an overprotected first-generation American who never set foot outside of Florida, I was surprised that I decided to, and even more so that my parents agreed to let me, attend an out-of-state art school. I couldn't so much as cross the street without firmly grasping my mom's apron strings, and now she was going to let me travel half way around the world to New England (we're Cuban, we exaggerate) for four years—in Patriots territory! Talk about the belly of the beast!

Having no acquaintances or family there, I was looking to make new friends. My dorm-mates were weird. Green mohawks, pierced eyebrows and army boots with tattered shorts. The boys were even stranger. Jane's Addiction, Metallica and Nine-Inch Nails permeated the airwaves. Toto, we're not in Miami any more. Better stick with the God-fearers—they look much less threatening.

After attending the Bible Study for a few weeks, I became very close friends with the leader of the group, James (the names have been changed to protect the innocent). James and I had a lot in common: we both loved music, had an affinity for sports and were Illustration majors, although he was one year ahead.

The Bible study usually consisted of a reading followed by an explanation. It's kind of like what happened at Mass but with one big difference: I wasn't bored to tears. Not even a bit. I started to love the Bible and read it constantly.

Over time I grew to respect James' ability to navigate the Bible. He would quote Romans 10:9 here, John 3:3 there and a little Isaiah for dessert. He made the Bible come alive. It made sense. He brought it down to my level.

He would answer any question I had and anything he said was Gospel truth to me. He slowly started introducing other works outside the Bible.

I devoured anything James gave me to read. He became my best friend, closer to me than my own brother. James had work-study at the school parking lot, which meant he sat in a small booth and pretended to be busy. I would join him and we would read the Bible together. I was growing in my knowledge of God and he was my guide.

James was not only my spiritual leader, but my artistic mentor as well. He was a master at wood-cuts and wanted to be a children's book illustrator. One of his projects was illustrating key passages from the Bible on giant wooden blocks. I was jealous that he could combine his two passions into one. Little did I know that soon, so would I.

James invited me to attend another Bible study at someone's house off campus on Wednesdays and I agreed. I couldn't turn down the offer.

The people at the home study welcomed me with a warm smile and even warmer coffee and danishes. The way to a man's heart is through his stomach, and both my flesh and spirit were satisfied. An older gentleman led the study, and he knew the Bible even more than James! I was hanging on every word that fell from his lips.

After attending a few of these meetings, James told me that the man who led the home study was the pastor of his church. No collar or robes, no pomp or circumstance. Just a regular, down-to-earth guy.

To take it a step further, James invited me to attend one of his non-denominational church services. Now, till this point, my mother's voice was still in my head. "Don't forget to go to church!" I attended Mass every Sunday morning at a nearby chapel. My pagan art school did not have any religious services. I didn't see the harm in attending James' church service instead. It's all the same, right?

The next Sunday morning I was ready to attend James' church. We both waited outside the dorm to be picked up by a parishioner whose job was to transport pedestrian worshipers. The car quickly darted us to the service. As I walked into the church, I saw the pastor's familiar face. In addition, I saw some of my classmates who also attended the Monday night Bible study.

On all accounts, I should have felt right at home. My best friend—my spiritual brother—was there. The good pastor was there and I was surrounded by schoolmates. But throughout the service, I felt uneasy and uncomfortable. After it ended, I voiced my concern to James and he said to give it time, I just needed to get accustomed to the new surroundings.

I did. I gave it three months. I did not go to Mass. It just seemed to me that the main event at these services was the pastor and his speech. After he had finished talking, the service was pretty much done. Something was missing. But what? I was surrounded by friends like at Mass. We read the Bible like at Mass. We even had coffee and doughnuts after service, just like Mass. But something was missing that was present at Mass, I just didn't know what.

One evening, something happened that had never happened before, and has never happened since. I am not one to experience the paranormal. My feet are rooted in the predictable and the logical. But that night, something unexplainable happened. God spoke to me.

Not like “God speaks to all of us in the recesses of our hearts” kind-of-way. Or “God speaks to me in the depths of my soul” kind-of-way. Or “God speaks to me through dancing butterflies, laughing children and happy rainbows” kind-of-way. No. This was real. This was audible. This scared me to death. I was in my room and the voice said: “The reason you do not feel at home is because I am not there in the flesh.” That was it. He said it once and offered no explanation, instruction or clarification. He did not introduce himself prior, nor linger after for Q & A.

To this point, I had only a cursory understanding as to what happened at Mass. I knew the priest rattled on a bit after reading the Bible, and that marked halftime. Then he said some stuff about bread and wine and body and blood, we stood up and kneeled down, then stood up and kneeled down, then stood up and ate a cardboard disc they claimed was bread and called it a day. I only had an inkling as to what the voice was indicating. But I was on a quest to find out a lot more.

I am a product of the Dade County Public School System. I never attended Catholic School and never really paid attention at CCD. I made an appointment with the priest at the chapel I attended and told him my quandary. He gave me a Catholic 101 on the Mass.

“You mean we really believe that the bread is Jesus’ body and the wine is his blood and that they are not just symbols?!” After a couple of hours with that patient Dominican priest, my head was spinning. I felt exhilarated and nauseous at the same time. I needed to investigate this matter further. I needed to talk to James.

I explained my vision to James (although it really can’t be a vision since I didn’t see anything). I mentioned to him my conversations and subsequent findings with the priest. In response, James showed me a side of him that I had never seen before. Before that day, he was nothing but courteous to me and always smiled from ear to ear. This time a scowl ran across his face and his voice was very stern. His demeanor changed 180 degrees. He told me words that still ring as clearly today as they did 15 years ago when he uttered them. He said “Don’t you know? The Mass is empty, meaningless ritual. It’s all just man-made stuff to keep you from God.”

Whoa. What a conflict! My best friend, gulp, my brother is telling me something that is completely contrary to what a priest told me! Up till this point, I was only casually aware of the rifts between Catholics and Protestants. It seems I hit a nerve. James told me to continue attending the service at his non-denominational church. I knew I couldn’t. I just needed some time to think, and pray.

I did. Both. I don’t remember ever praying as fervently as I did back then. I knew this was big. Have you ever seen a cartoon where the character reaches a fork in the road and must decide which path to take? Regardless of which he chooses, his life will never be the same. Either decision will involve great pain and loss. This is where I found myself. The crossroad.

After much deliberation, I decided to go back to Mass and not attend James’ church. I knew I had to tell him and the sooner the better. He had work-study that day and I knew he could be found in the little booth in the parking lot, wasting time. I stepped in and slowly began telling him of my decision. I could see my choice hurt him. Here I am, half-a-world away and I’m plunging a sword into the heart of the person who took me under his wing and showed me the ways of God; the man who taught me to draw, paint and appreciate artwork. He was my friend when no one else was and this is how I repay him, with betrayal. I wasn’t even paid thirty pieces of silver.

James was at the point of tears. It was evident he wanted to tell me something, but was reluctant. With downtrodden eyes and a sullen expression, James stammered and stuttered and finally told me the bad news; I was “anathema.” I knew he had just said something deep and meaningful—to him. Unfortunately, it lost its impact on me since I had no idea what “anathema” meant.

I needed to get out of his booth. I ran back to my dorm room and looked up the definition. “A person or thing accursed or consigned to damnation or destruction.” What?! You mean I’m going to hell? Here I thought that this Catholic and Protestant thing was different in the way that one person prefers chocolate and the other vanilla yet they both love ice cream. Isn’t it the same Jesus?

Are Catholics going to hell? Is my family? Am I? My decision ran much deeper than losing my best friend, it meant losing my eternal soul. I couldn’t sleep. I couldn’t talk to James, I couldn’t talk to a priest. No Mass, no service. Everyone had an agenda. I needed time to think. I was depressed. I was alone. I was in spiritual crisis. I needed some rest.

Luckily, a long break was just around the corner, which meant I would get to fly home. The timing couldn’t have been any better.

I didn’t know how much James influenced me until I returned home. One of the rooms in my mom’s house had a small shelf where she kept a statue of St. Barbara, a small bottle of holy water and flowers. My newfound spiritual enlightenment caused me to disparage the statue and explain to my mother the sin of graven images. She smiled uncomfortably. She also found some tracts in my room that related how Catholics, in obeying the Pope, *worshiping* Mary and confessing to a priest are hell-bound. When challenged, I found myself regurgitating everything James had told me my faith was.

I told my mother that I felt God calling me to explore other denominations and I wanted to visit *Church on the Rock*, a non-denominational church in our neighborhood. My mom must have felt saddened and hurt. But at the same time, she felt she could not hinder my search. I needed to follow where God was leading. My mom’s words echoed those of the quintessential Mother; “Do whatever he tells you.”

My mother has always been a devout Catholic. Many Hispanics are. She never went to Mass wearing a mantilla, nor did she frequent apparition sites (although we did drive to Conyers once to take a picture of the sun). Her devotion was her silent witness.

Every morning as we drove to school, we would say the Lord's Prayer together. We never missed Sunday Mass or a Holy Day of obligation. And we would never be caught dead with a burger in our mouths on Fridays of Lent.

My mother would drag my brother and me to visit very distant relatives whose family had placed them in a hospice. These two older ladies were well into their 90's, and my mother made sure they were visited weekly.

Whenever family members were sick, she would always be the first one to visit, take care of their errands, drive them to doctor's appointments and humbly place their responsibilities on her shoulders.

When there was a rift among family members, she would be the one to reconcile the warring parties. Her ear was always open to anyone who needed to vent, needed advice or needed consolation.

My only guess is she must have had a copy of the Beatitudes in her pocket and went through the week checking them off.

After I got through this spiritual crisis, my mother admitted that she said a daily Rosary for me. I'm not surprised.

My feelings at Church on the Rock in Miami were much the same as those in James' church. Something essential was missing. When I returned to school, I informed James of my decision to return to Mass. He was very disappointed. We had reached an impasse which severed our relationship. From that day on, we would simply exchange silent nods as we passed each other on our way to class. My brother had become a mere acquaintance.

I had not stepped foot in a Catholic church for over half a year. I mustered the courage and decided to return to Mass. This is where the Spirit was prompting and I had to obey, even if it meant risking my immortal soul.

As the door squeaked open, I caught whiff of the wooden pews, the burning candles and the lingering incense from the previous Mass. My heart leapt with joy. Seeing the statues felt like being reunited with old friends. At the front, the red glow from the Sanctuary lamp indicated Jesus was sacramentally present. I was home. For good. Sometimes you need to step away from home, to see that where you were, was indeed home.

This event in 1989 sparked a love affair which is as strong today as it was then. The Mass is what brought me back into communion with the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church founded by Jesus Christ and I made a promise to myself to learn as much about it as I could.

After graduating and returning home, I enrolled in the Lay Ministry and Adult Faith Formation program in the Archdiocese of Miami. For two years we were schooled in spirituality, theology, and pastoral ministry. Afterwards, I attended YAMI (Young Adult Ministry Institute) and the Catholic Scripture Study Program at St. Thomas University where I grew in my understanding of the Catholic faith and in my ability to serve the Church. All the while, I was reading book after book on the Liturgy in intense, self-guided study.

I have been studying the Mass now for a quarter century and have come to the very same conclusion as did a 19th century French parish priest:

**“If we really understood the Mass, we would die of joy.”**

—ST. JOHN VIANNEY

The Church says that the liturgy is “the summit toward which the activity of the Church is directed; it is also the font from which all her power flows.” What a profound statement! Simply put, the Mass is EVERYTHING. In the words of Francesco Forgione, an Italian Capuchin priest:

**“It would be easier for the world to survive without the sun than to do without Holy Mass.”**

—ST. PADRE PIO

In sharing my newfound knowledge with friends and family, it became apparent that few knew of the richness of the Mass—its history, beauty and purpose. Most, like myself, simply attended because, well, it’s just something we did—more so out of cultural obligation than religious conviction.

While there are several excellent titles on the Mass, it is my own experience that few of these books fall into the hands of the every-day Catholic, especially of those who are on the cusp of collegiate life. What is the best way to convey the message of the Mass to them?

Today's young adults are tech-savvy. They embrace new media and receive information quite different from the previous generation. Each day, more and more are equipped with digital tools—especially tablets—which allow them to be engaged and entertained while being educated.

Several parochial schools in my own Archdiocese have completely abandoned books for iPads. In the first quarter of 2013, global tablet shipments totaled 49.2 million units, surpassing shipments in the entire first half of 2012. Tablets have shown no sign of slowing down.

To reach the masses with the Mass, I decided to encapsulate 25 years of research into *The Mass Explained* tablet app. My degree in graphic design taught me the importance the senses have in the learning process and the Catholic Church has been blessed with a vast inheritance of paintings, sculptures, vessels, vestments and sacred sites.

This rich visual history plays a primary role in the app's design. The works of the greater masters, as well as those of lesser known artists, help illustrate the evolution of the Mass. To see fine details, users can pinch to zoom in on select paintings and illuminations.

The Church also has a treasury of prayers in Greek and Latin, Gregorian chants and liturgical music. Actually hearing the *HaMotzi*—the Hebrew blessing over bread, for example, makes evident its connection to the Eucharistic Prayer said by the priest. To many, it comes as a surprise to know that Vivaldi's familiar *Gloria* is sacred liturgical music.

Spinnable 3D artifacts and immersive 360° panoramas add an element of fun and the sense of touch.

While nothing can compare to actually seeing the art, visiting the architectural sites, hearing the music and prayers or holding the objects in your hand, modern technology allows for a more engaging user experience than static text on a printed page.

It is the purpose of this app to reach this generation that is embarking on a critical time of transition—when the faith of their parents either becomes their own, or it does not.

This app was written to myself 25 years ago. This is the information I wish I had known then. This is what I wish James had known about the liturgy. The Mass is not an empty, meaningless, man-made ritual, but rather, it is a divinely instituted Sacrament, rooted in Scripture and tempered by tradition. It is the holiest thing we can do on earth. The greatest mystery. The most perfect form of prayer. A most inconceivable act of love!

“Man should tremble, the world should vibrate,  
all Heaven should be deeply moved  
when the Son of God appears on the altar  
in the hands of the priest.”

—ST. FRANCIS OF ASSISI

