

BARBARA HEIL

How to win a Catholic? How a Protestant preacher and missionary came into the Church

As a missionary engaged in a wide spectrum of Christian endeavors my whole adult life, many people might assume I grew up in a Catholic or a Christian home. The truth of the matter is that I was not raised as a Christian. My family did not go to church. When I grew older, I didn't remember ever being inside a church building.

My earliest memories are of being whipped. My father was a very angry man at that time in his life. I got a whipping or a beating and was then tossed into my room. I would look out my bedroom window as I wept and saw a man in the sky who comforted me every time. I didn't know who he was or what his name was, but I knew he was my friend.

My mother left when I was twelve, leaving my brothers and me with my father. This was another difficult time in my life. We moved from California to Whidbey Island in Washington State. I struggled through middle school, feeling totally abandoned and stuck.

I did have something going for me, however. I loved learning and I loved school. Sometimes I slept on my friends' couches, but I managed to finish school and move on in my education.

I was a wreck during the 70s, but my friends were all wrecks too. As the saying goes, "Birds of a feather flock together." During my college days, I partied, self-medicated, and became more and more disillusioned and anxious. I didn't care what happened to me. I was really broken. I felt so alone, and I was getting ready to bomb out of the school I had worked so hard to get into.

Then something began to happen to my friends and me. Some little old ladies living down the street were praying for the students who lived in my house. We were invited to some meetings. My friends went to this

meeting in Woodinville, Washington, and when they came back, they were so different. I couldn't believe how they were acting!

They told me they'd found Jesus Christ.

I knew these people, and at first it was pretty hard to believe their new "act." However, it turned out that my friends really had met Jesus Christ at a Charismatic meeting, and they really had changed. They spoke nonstop about Jesus.

I had never heard the name of God said in love. "Jesus" was a swear word for me. Now suddenly, my friends said, "Jesus loves you." I was afraid of them and wondered, *What are they into?* They had the audacity to tell me they were praying for me.

That made me nervous. I didn't like it at all! Their words made me uncomfortable. I understood anger, I understood shame, I understood rage, and I understood loneliness, but I didn't understand their joy.

They walked around with Bibles under their arms. I watched them suspiciously. *You can't fool me*, I thought. *I know what you've done*.

I continued to observe my friends and saw their changed lives. They went to church every single day. Who does that? They invited me to go along – every single time. No, thank you. I did keep watching, though, and slowly I became curious about what was going on at that church. I did not know yet that there were many people praying for me. At the same time, I was actively searching for someplace else to live.

I was angry with myself when I finally arrived at the church I swore I would never step foot in. But I needed to tell my friends I was leaving for good, and I wanted to tell them goodbye. My heart pounded as I entered through the back doors. The music and singing rang through the old Methodist church. I groaned inwardly when I spotted my friends. They were seated in the second row. I could feel the old wood floors rocking under the swaying and dancing college students. I grew angrier with each step I took. *I am going to give them a piece of my mind. That's it! They are no longer my friends. They would rather be in church than with me.*

I was wearing a pair of those old wooden clogs. For those too young to remember, clogs are shoes made of wood, with a thin piece of rubber on the bottom. The rubber on my clogs had worn off. As I walked toward my friends, the music stopped.

Clomp, clomp, clomp rang out on that wood floor. With each step, the angrier and more embarrassed I became. “Gee thanks for this”, I hissed into my friend’s ear. “I’m leaving. I just wanted to let you know that I am going.”

My friends were exuberant that I’d shown up. They were whispering to each other, “Barbara’s here.”

“I am *not* here”, I whispered back.

I wanted to leave. I made it to the end of the pew, wanting to run out the back. It’s difficult to explain what happened next, but I ended up standing in front of the high platform, from which a Latino man was preparing to speak. My heart pounded and I felt embarrassed, but I could not leave. I stood there looking at the wood at the bottom of the platform.

Finally, the man looked at me and asked, “Is there something I can do for you?”

I couldn’t think of what to say, so I blurted, “Just get it over with. Whatever you did to them, do to me.”

I’d never learned the faith through a catechism class or heard of Scripture. I’d never heard about God or attended church, but when I walked into that place, people were praying for me. There was an atmosphere of life. I don’t know what the man on the platform prayed, but I burst into tears.

Women surrounded me and wrapped their arms around me. The preacher preached for another few minutes, and 200 college students came forward to give their lives to Christ, to the glory of God!

That night I discovered there was a God and that He loved me. I wasn’t an accident. Someone in the universe loved me and wanted me. His name was Jesus. Suddenly, I understood that He was the Man I’d talked to as a kid outside my window, but at the time I hadn’t understand why He was there.

When I woke up the day after the service, the sky appeared bluer, the grass greener, and the sun sunnier. I was a brand-new person in Jesus Christ. I was filled with the love of God. My life was literally transformed by the Love of God. I had never read the Scriptures, never heard a homily, but I had a life changing encounter with the Love of God, and would never be the same again. Later on, I often asked the Lord, “How

did I end up serving You? How did I end up walking in your Kingdom? How did I receive Your love?"

As a new believer, I didn't know that other people knew about Jesus. I mean, no one had ever told *me*. No one had told my friends before that. I didn't know other people had heard of Him too. So, I made it my business to share the Good News. I wanted everybody to know. I was thrilled and amazed that God was real and that He could change my life. I asked people, "Did you know that Jesus was a real Person? That He died for us?" I was shocked when people said yes, they had heard of Him. Why hadn't they told *me*?

We attended church every night and studied the Word of God. My life began to be transformed. My mind and my heart began to be transformed. God healed me from the inside out. I learned that God had chosen me before the world began. I found out I had a purpose for living. God healed my life. He healed my shame. He healed me of issues with abandonment, self-hatred, and addiction.

If God could love me, He could love anyone. If He could bring life and healing into my life, He could do that in *anybody's* life. Everyone needed to know Him. I wanted to tell as many people as possible that Jesus was alive and that He loved them.

My life was so new and changed, and I was so in love with the One who loved me, that I knew I could never live a "normal" life from that point on. I felt a call to missions, so I decided to go to Bible school. I wanted the world to know that Jesus was alive.

I took classes to prepare for the mission field. The first nation I wanted to visit was the Philippines. One important course that helped prepare me for my mission was entitled, "How to Win a Catholic." I was awarded a certificate for completing the course. Shortly after this, I joined a missionary community all the way across the United States. I lived their missionary life of prayer and fasting, coupled with immersion in the Scriptures. We sought God and allowed the Lord to speak into our hearts and lives.

I did go to the Philippines, and many other countries, bringing the gospel of Jesus. When we arrived in the mission field and began working, we often enlisted the help of local Christians. God began to show up in the meetings, and we would need assistance with crowds, logistical

changes, and all the things that go with a suddenly growing outreach. I remember our time in Manila. We were having fantastic meetings, which were being televised. “If you can keep this up”, the studio manager told our team, “we will give you another week of free television”.

We accepted immediately. However, we had a problem. Half our team had to go home. At the prayer meeting the next day, my pastor told the people that we needed help because half our team was leaving, and we wanted to take advantage of the opportunity to continue the meetings. A lady who had been coming to the meetings and helping with the crusade in Manila asked, “Can I invite people from my church to help you?” We accepted gratefully. My pastor said, “Bring as much help as you can.”

That night a bunch of Spirit-filled Catholics showed up. This was a serious problem for me. I had a certificate in *winning* Catholics – not ministering with them. We encountered this “problem” many times. Everywhere we went, Catholics showed up. It didn’t make sense to me. (I had that certificate!)

I met and married my late husband (may he rest in peace) at our missionary community. After several years of marriage and being told I would never have children, the Lord healed, and I began to conceive and have children. Each one is a miracle!

During this season of life, my husband and children and I traveled all over the world, sometimes just us, and sometimes with large teams, and we saw God do amazing things – things only God can do. He is Healer. He is Deliverer. He wants to change people and bring them to new life in Him. The Father’s heart is that no one should remain separated from Him because of sin. He desires that none would perish, but that all would come to eternal life (2 Peter 3:9). He sends us, His children, to share Him with anyone we encounter. Jesus says the harvest is ripe and ready. He tells His disciples, “Go!”

Our ministry, based in Virginia, began to experience a great worship movement. When we prayed, it felt like the “cloud” of God’s Presence entered the building. Our prayer team ended up lying on the floor slain in the Spirit and pouring out songs of praise and worship. People came from around the world to experience the presence of the Lord as we

worshiped, praised, sang, and adored the Lord. He is worthy of all our worship. He is worthy of our songs of praise.

We got swept up in this atmosphere of faith and traveled less to overseas missions so we could host the people who were worshipping with us. It was an extraordinary time. Spirit-filled Catholics joined us too, which I still found scandalous. (Remember, I had my certificate.)

One morning, I taught from the Song of Solomon. I shared with many visitors from around the world about the Bridegroom's longing for his bride. A Catholic couple were in attendance that morning. The husband said that my talk reminded him of a book about this topic, and that I should read it. He lent me the book, which I graciously received... and then promptly set aside in my house.

A week went by, and then a second week before the man asked how I was coming along with the book he'd lent me. I thought I should be polite and at least look through it. When I finally opened the book and read through it, I could not put it down. I loved it and was amazed!

The first thing I noticed was that I thought *our* little ministry was on the "cutting edge", but this book had been written five hundred years ago. The second thing that struck me was it was written by a Catholic. And thirdly, I noticed it was written by a nun. How could a Catholic nun 500 years ago write about what we were experiencing today? The Lord was my Bridegroom. I was walking with and yearning for Him, delighting in His presence and encountering His goodness. And this woman, St. Theresa of Avila, whom I had never heard of, repeated everything that was in my heart. This stunned and bewildered me. How could she, a Catholic, have written this book? (Remember, I had that certificate!)

Bill eventually asked me to return the book. I bought my own copy and asked Bill, "Do you have any more of those books?"

Yes, he did. Bill gave me St. Augustine, St. Bernard of Clairvaux, St. John of the Cross, and St. Catherine of Siena. He fed me with these fabulous books written by saints, whom I later discovered were "Doctors of the Roman Catholic Church." Here I was, a prophetic minister in Protestant Pentecostalism who traveled the world, spoke at conferences and missions, founded churches and fellowships, but in my spare time I read Catholic "contraband."

I ate them up and loved the books, but... they was *Catholic!* I still couldn't reconcile what I'd been taught about Catholicism with what I was discovering. I underlined and circled the things I didn't understand in my reading and looked up the new words and names.

In the meantime, we moved our family to the Midwest and started a church, where I was busy singing, teaching, and assisting my husband. We also continued to hold conferences and outreaches and pray for people all over the region. When I met Catholics, I asked them thousands of questions, so much so that people ran in the other direction when they saw me coming. I found out that many Catholics I met hadn't been to Mass in years. They didn't understand my questions, let alone know the answers.

I was a mom, a wife, and a pastor. I ministered full time, all the while continuing to read about the wonderful men and women of the early church, as well as the Doctors of the Church. This raised so many questions. Obviously, these early people were Christians, but how could they be Catholic?

I searched the Internet for answers. Why do Catholics believe in the magisterium? What does "transubstantiation" mean? I later stumbled on a website called the Coming Home Network and joined the Ministers Forum, where I could sign in anonymously.

Finally! I could argue with Catholic apologists without hurting anybody's feelings. I was delighted to find a safe space to ask my questions and try to understand how the Doctors of the Church and early Church Fathers and Mothers could be Catholic while writing such Christ-centered material. The Coming Home Network asked if I wanted some books. Of course, I did! They sent several books. I read them and researched the material, which took several years.

During those years, I participated in a Catholic Pentecostal meeting in Philadelphia with Msgr. Walsh, who had visited our ministry. I was excited to be attending with real-life, Spirit-filled Catholics. I decided the safest way to attend this conference was to sit in the back. If things got too "Catholic", or if they started doing their liturgy, I could watch from a safe distance. I remembered thinking on the way to Philadelphia, "I will chew on the meat and spit out the bones."

I considered this a very sensible plan.

The entire conference was beautiful, and I met many wonderful people. They knew I was not Catholic and were kind and welcoming. The talks were scriptural, and the music was full of praise and worship. Despite my early training (and that certificate that told me otherwise!) I knew these people were believers. They were Christians, and they loved the Word of God.

The conference was going to end with some kind of procession. *This sounds really Catholic*, I thought, and I decided to stand in the back. The music began and the atmosphere was lovely. I sensed the Holy Spirit. I closed my eyes and lifted my hands in worship.

Soon, waves of the Presence of God began to wash over me. I could not keep standing but found myself bowing to the King. Wave after wave of His love continued to wash over me and I bowed before Him again. When I came up, I opened my eyes. A priest stood over me holding a gold handle with a big starburst on top, with a glass case inside. I didn't know what it was called. I later learned it was a monstrance containing a consecrated Eucharist. Catholics believe this is the body, blood, soul, and divinity of Jesus Christ. I didn't know any of this. All I knew was that Jesus Christ Himself was standing in front of me. What an overwhelming experience! What was I supposed to do with that? I was astounded.

Monumental changes took place in my life over the next few years. I continued to read and ponder the writings of the early Christian Church and Catholic saints. I also wondered about my experience in Philadelphia. My husband suddenly died, leaving me with four teenaged children. I continued to minister. I started a mentoring program, a small Bible school, and I took ministry teams to other countries for short-term missions.

When I stumbled on some CDs by Ralph Martin, I decided I was getting too close to this Catholic thing. I needed to talk to someone. I felt the leading of the Holy Spirit to call my good friend, Debbie Kendrick, who was from my Virginia-based community. She'd spent several years ministering throughout Europe. I told her about my flourishing ministry and about my extraordinary experiences in Philadelphia and how strongly attracted to the Catholic Church I had become. I told her how ridiculous I felt. But the writings of the Church and her saints spoke to my soul, and

I loved visiting the beautiful churches and cathedrals. Then I paused and waited for her rebuke.

To my amazement, she said, “Me too!”

What? I thought.

Debbie shared her journey and how the Lord was drawing her to Catholics. While preaching at ecumenical meetings across Europe, she’d met so many loving Catholics, including Fr. Raniero Cantalamessa. (He has served as the priest to the popes from 1980 to the current day.) Debbie and I prayed together, astounded and questioning what the Lord might be doing in our lives. At least now I had someone with whom I could share.

Providentially, the Lord provided me the opportunity to take a sabbatical. He performed so many miracles for my children and me. The very day my sabbatical began, my whom I had experienced deep healing and forgiveness toward, called to tell me she had been diagnosed with fourth-stage non-Hodgkin’s lymphoma. Because the Lord had orchestrated my sabbatical, I was able to fly out and be with her. People from around the world were praying for her as she received treatment.

I brought my Catholic contraband reading material along. One day as I sat reading in a chair next to my mother, she asked what I was reading. I hesitated. I didn’t know how to explain how her minister daughter now read Catholic books. Finally, I confessed. I told her how much joy I felt when sitting in a Catholic cathedral, and about how much truth and inspiration I was gleaning from Catholic writers, especially the historical ones.

“There’s just something about it that is so beautiful”, I said. “I feel it pulling at me.”

Mom looked at me and said, “Well, you know you were baptized Catholic, right?”

What? I was baptized Catholic? How did I not know this? I was stunned and couldn’t believe it. I had been baptized at St. Francis Xavier Catholic Church in St. Louis, Missouri. Amazing! I called the church and got a copy of my Baptismal Certificate.

Mom told me that it was her grandmother, my great-grandmother Madeleine, who encouraged her to have me baptized. Wow! I had always wondered why Jesus was with me as a child, when I was being whipped

and crying in my room, and I would see the “man in the sky.” I didn’t know who he was until I met the Lord at the meeting in Woodinville, Washington. I often wondered why He was there. Why was Jesus with me? Why did I love Him so deeply when I learned who He was?

Now I understood. I had been baptized as a child. Even though I didn’t know it, I was in covenant with God. God never forgot He was in covenant with me. The power of that Baptism transcended my head knowledge. I hadn’t believed in infant baptism up to that point.

Some readers may have children who have left the church. Some have grandchildren who have never been in a church. However, if they are in covenant with God by baptism, the angels and the graces are still there. The covenant is there, and God is still dealing with your children, even if you cannot see it.

God is not a liar. He is faithful. He is faithful to His promises. Don’t just be sad about children who have left God and the Church. Pray for them!

If you have children, if you have grandchildren, or if you have great-grandchildren or nieces or nephews or neighbors who have not been baptized yet, do not be sad and defeated. Pray for them! Believe that God will move upon them. Also, do not be afraid to encourage baptism. It is time to learn from Great-grandmother Madeleine’s faith and trust, and to give those gentle reminders.

The Lord did much in my life during my sabbatical and during the time spent with my mother. I had people around the world praying for her, and I prayed with her often. I was with her for her last PET scan in 2010, and it showed she was cancer free. Glory to God, she is still cancer free! God still works miracles!

I returned home wondering what to make of the fact that I had been baptized in the Catholic Church. The Coming Home Network was still sending books and asking me where I was on my journey. I resumed preaching and speaking, taking teams all over the world to share Jesus and spread the gospel.

Debbie and I were also sharing regularly. She introduced me to her son-in-law, Benoit, a Catholic with whom I discussed what I was discovering in the Church. “What am I supposed to do now, Lord?” I prayed. The Holy Spirit spoke in my heart that I should take a class.

Perhaps I could audit a theology class or something, so I browsed online and prayed. I checked out different Catholic universities, but the Lord said “no” and “no.”

While looking through websites for a university, a banner crossed the page. I clicked the banner and found myself at the Harry J Flynn Catechetical Institute. I didn’t know what “catechetical” meant. (I later found out that you couldn’t graduate until you could say “catechetical.”) After several phone calls, I got a call back from a man who wanted to know why I, a non-Catholic minister, wanted to attend the institute.

I explained who I was and what God was doing in my heart concerning the Church.

“Well, let me tell you my story”, he said after listening to me. “My name is Jeff Cavins...” He shared his amazing story about coming back to the Catholic Church after being an Assemblies of God pastor for several years. At the end of our conversation, Jeff told me I needed permission to attend. I was not even Catholic yet, and I needed permission from the bishop. Welcome to the Church!

When I started this two-year class at the catechetical institute, I was thrilled to discover Catholics with their Bibles, their Catechisms, and with highlight markers, wanting to learn their faith. I never expected I would end up where I did! As I studied the Catechism, I marveled at how scripturally based it was. I had difficulties with some Catholic teachings during my second year, and I was astounded at the teachers’ presentations. They addressed the very things I was having issues with.

Many nights after my Monday evening class, I drove home weeping at the beauty of God in the Church. This posed a new problem. I was still a preacher, a minister, a missionary, a mentor, and an evangelist. I ministered throughout America and took teams around the world for short-term missions. I often flew out on Friday, ministered to people in meetings and endeavors, and flew back to the Minneapolis airport on Monday. Then I picked up my car from the parking garage and drove straight to my class at the Harry J Flynn Catechetical Institute.

During my classes, something happened that changed everything. Someone suggested I start RCIA (Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults). During all my years of reading, researching on the Internet, visiting cathedrals and churches all over the world, no Catholic had ever invited

me to anything to do with their church. What about evangelism? What about teaching the faith to their children, as well as to new people who wanted to draw close to God.

But that all changed when a couple in my small group at the Monday night class invited me to RCIA and often asked if I had signed up for the RCIA classes yet. I told them “no” so many times. Finally, one Monday when I picked up my car from the Minneapolis airport, I thought, *I can't show up for class again and tell them I have not called Randy, the RCIA coordinator.* I called him, thinking it was too late in the course to begin. To my surprise, he told me I could jump in. Even though it was December and the classes had started in September, they were expecting me.

I started RCIA as a Pentecostal, prophetic minister during my last year at the Catechetical Institute. I thought curiosity and the desire to learn had pulled me into RCIA. After all, I was still busy with a gospel ministry and had no intention of changing denominations.

But I realized I was a closet Catholic!

During a speaking break at a conference in New Hampshire, I saw a missed call from my friend Debbie Kendrick. Upon returning her call, her first words were, “We did it!”

“What did you do?” I asked.

“We came into the Catholic Church.”

My first thought was, *She beat me.*

As Debbie described getting their marriage blessed and being confirmed, all I could think was, *She beat me!* My next thought totally shocked me, *Why is “she beat me the first thought I am having”?*

I was thrilled for my friend, but I was shaken by my reaction. I lay in bed that night pondering the meaning of my reaction. What did it mean? What was I to do? I had come to a point that before I died, I wanted to become a Catholic. I asked Jeff Cavins if a woman like me, someone who ran a ministry school for short term missions, a Prophetic Minister and Evangelist had ever become Catholic.

He looked at me and said, “Not too many.”

Yet, I felt so drawn and I asked the Holy Spirit what I should do. The Lord reminded me of my Catholic baptism. I was also reminded by my new Catholic friends that the Church already considered me a Catholic.

The roadblocks to becoming a Catholic were many. I had a ministry and people to whom I was accountable. I loved what I did for the Lord. I loved evangelizing and praying for people to come into relationship with Jesus by surrendering themselves to Him. Nothing brought me greater joy than bringing team members to foreign missions and seeing them use the gifts God had imparted to them for the good of those around them.

But more than this, I was concerned about the lack of awareness of the importance of bringing the message of Christ to others, which was obvious in the Catholic churches I had visited. During those years of visiting churches and cathedrals, no one had ever invited me to anything, until I was finally invited to RCIA by an evangelizing couple. I had observed that during Mass, no one was “manning the nets.” The Catholics didn’t seem to notice the fish that were trying to jump into the boat.

Where would I bring people to be ministered to, healed, and set free when I brought them to the Lord if I was Catholic? I was an evangelist, and I wanted people to know the love of God that could change their lives.

Once more I turned to Jeff Cavins. “I believe. But wouldn’t it be selfish of me to quit ministering to others so I could receive the Eucharist?”

Without missing a beat, he said, “I would hate to think that when you were invited into a deep place of intimacy you would think you had better things to do.”

Perfect response! There is nothing better than to receive the Lord. A priest friend reminded me that obedience only brings blessing. He told me this every time he saw me.

Obedience only brings blessing. I chose obedience. It was scary, and I felt like I was stepping into uncharted waters when I made arrangements to resign from my ministry and move forward. Friends did not understand. Ministries and churches and pastors did not understand why I was entering the Catholic Church. It was very difficult.

I visited Rome during the Easter Vigil, and had permission from my Archbishop to receive my First Communion under Pope Francis. Later, I was confirmed in the Church on April 27, 2013, for the glory of God.

As I drove toward the same church where I'd attended RCIA to receive my Confirmation during a quiet, Saturday morning Mass, I felt the presence of the Lord in my car. I also sensed the presence of Great-grandmother Madeleine, who had been instrumental in my Baptism. I felt such excitement, like I was going to a wedding. And so, I was.

Epilogue: Since I came into the Catholic Church, many extraordinary things have happened. After being a widow for 8 years, I married my husband Jeff and moved to his farm in Iowa. We became lay missionaries and began to participate in ecumenical programs from Rome. While on a mission to Russia with my husband, I received a message from my mother, who had left the Catholic Church so many years ago. After completing RCIA and going to Reconciliation, she received Communion once again after some fifty-five years. Since then, my daughter and my grandson have both come into the Church.

But that's another story!