

OMC FaithLife Story: Joan Forde

Joan is a long-time OMC parishioner, a freelance writer and for many years was a columnist for the Catholic Standard and Times. She and her late husband George had four children, three of whom graduated from OMC Parish School.

When I was a student at an area Catholic college, I thought of church as a bunch of bothersome rules that God was like a resident policeman who demanded perfection. It made me feel angry and I rebelled despite years of good Catholic schooling at the Sacred Heart Academy. I pretended to my parents that I was observant. They practiced a form of tribal Catholicism that they were born into and it was conflated with their Irish identity. They never talked about the “why” of their practices. We were just Catholic by decree.

I went to graduate school at Penn and was surrounded for the first time by a secular environment. All of a sudden, “Catholic” didn’t mean anything except something to make jokes about. I saw that people were having fun; they didn’t care about religion – my circle of non-practicing Jews, Protestants and Muslims. It’s possible when you’re young to ignore that life is temporary, which was natural for me at that age.

My parents were dismayed when they figured out I wasn’t going out with someone from their “tribe.” To them, Irish Catholic was the best society you could keep – even though they constantly feuded with most of their families. To satisfy them, I went to a mixer of Catholic college alumni at the Philopatrian Club. The joke-y guy at the door taking the \$1.00 entrance fee became my future husband, George.

From that night forward, I was swept along by his infectious faith. By seeing the way he lived his life, I could see the beauty in it. It awakened the memory of the good things about being Catholic, the beautiful music, how we sang Gregorian chants in Latin every day in school after lunch, the hushed reverence of the chapel. Even the lessons learned in our Christian Doctrine class started to come back to me. And the things that George said, like when we were engaged: “Hey, this is going to be hard, but love makes it easy and perfect love, the love of Christ for the other, will make it a joy.”

My marriage and child rearing experience corroborated ideas I had learned in school. I would say to myself, “Oh, wait! This is true! This is what the Beatitudes mean. They are hard but they are worth the effort.”

Through my years with George, I kept seeing that our marriage as truly a sacrament. God was always the third party in the relationship despite the times of difficulties. When George died six years ago, it was vividly clear that the love we had together was sacramental and eternal. His death was both hard to bear but also joyful because I knew that he was with God and we would meet again.

Some years ago, George and I were visiting Paris and we took a tour of the *Les Catacombs*, a tourist attraction beneath the city. I saw bones everywhere, bones of thousands of people from long ago. It was very, very dark down there and I felt faint and wanted to get out. Here I was in

the most beautiful city in the world... surrounded by death! But at the same time, I thought that all of these bones represented people who had longings and dreams; each one was dear to someone else and saw the sky. It gave me a new appreciation for life and clarity about the impermanence of it.

I also thought about the early Christians who gathered in other catacombs. What prompted them to be joyful and pray, sharing bread and singing? Dying, especially in those days when being Christian was against the law, was always a present threat. They must have had complete faith in this Jesus, the man who came back from the dead. Only He could show them the way through the thicket of mortality.

So many people don't ponder how the Church started, with this breathtaking triumph of life over death. The news of the Resurrection must have been like a fire spreading fast. Here was something utterly new and different. It might have been easier to be a Christian then, before all the dust of centuries, and the appearance of the inevitable flaws of any institution of which humans are a part.

I don't trust myself to have found the Catholic faith on my own. It was grace acting through other people in my life. Now I realize The Catholic Church is absolutely the original church of Jesus. At Mass, I truly feel like I am attending the Last Supper.

To me, the universe itself has a cruciform basis. My faith is everything to me – life, love, the remedy for sorrow. It's so much easier to respect every other human I meet, seeing him or her through God's eyes.