

FaithLife Story: Mary Kline

Dr. Mary Kline is a pediatrician in a private group practice in Chestnut Hill. She and her husband Dean live in Mount Airy with their three children, Libby, Penny, and Emmett ages 11, 9, and 6. They are OMC parishioners and the children are students at OMC Parish School.

A Catholic identity was always very important to me. It was ingrained in us by my parents, who were both from Ireland. My parents were a major influence because they were both pillars of strength and faith in different ways. My dad was the dogmatic one who always said, "If you pray, why worry?" He was very "everything happens for a reason," but when I was in the throes of something really bad, that didn't help much. My mother was much more into the spirit of the law and understanding why a person may have done something wrong.

We lived in five states by the time I was in fifth grade because of my dad's HR job at Westinghouse. The thing that always grounded us was going to mass, even when we had to drive forty-five minutes in Oklahoma to get to a Catholic church.

My dad created a culture of tolerance wherever he went because he came from a culture where Catholics were historically oppressed. He believed everyone should be open and tolerant and that made a big impression on me. It seems to me that the closer you are to the Irish immigrant experience, the less intolerant you are. I was first generation; I didn't have to be taught it. I lived it. The troubles in Northern Ireland were always part of our awareness.

The fundamental of faith for us was just following in Jesus' footsteps. When I was around 4, we had a banner in the house that said, "In moments of silence, listen for His voice." When you're four, you have a lot of time on your hands so I thought a lot about what would Jesus do. My parents taught us that if you let Him in, He will be present. If you talk too much, he won't. The most important thing is to love God and that will guide the rest of your relationships.

I went to high school in Minnesota, where we were for that entire time. The school was run by the Sisters of St. Joseph, who are also connected to OMC Parish School. I adored them because they were all about peace and social justice and how to be a good person. The most important influences on me about faith, besides my parents, were my teachers in high school, especially a nun and a brother who taught religion. They were passionate about what they did and lead good Catholic lives. They shared an honest, vulnerable faith with us. And yet they were fun people, too.

I know a lot of people with no faith who were raised as Catholics. They say they were turned off to religion because of that experience. I give 100% credit to the Sisters of St. Joseph that I wasn't turned off being Catholic. They created such a warm, accepting culture and they encouraged questions and critical thinking.

I am a complete mystery to my friends who are ex-Catholics. Really, it's a conversation killer when I say that I am Catholic and my kids go to Catholic school. They think I am a holly roller. There is a lot of confusion, like, "Why are you sending your kids there?" I say it's very important to raise children with faith and that good values will make them good people. But a lot of people think you don't have to have faith, you don't have to believe in God. Of course, a lot were turned off by the pedophilia scandals.

The kind of Catholic experience that turns people away from the Catholic faith doesn't exist at OMC even though it may exist in other parts of the country. OMC and Father Bob form such a welcoming community and they want to meet you where you are. I think some of the estrangement from the Church comes from the type of person you are. Are you the type of person who holds a grievance when you are wronged? Or are you a person who asks, "What is it about this that I don't like? Is this worth it?" I think it comes down to what's inside a person, their connection to the Holy Spirit. If you have that pulsing inside you, you have to go somewhere.

There were a few times when I almost didn't stay Catholic. One of those times was when we lived in Manayunk during the 2000 presidential campaign. The priest would preach with such vitriol about the presidential election and it was so one-sided. I was infuriated that that he was pushing this down my throat. I thought, "This isn't what you're supposed to be preaching on. What are you doing?" We resolved that by joining another Manayunk parish with a wonderful pastor. It was all about community and evangelization and Catholic education.

The pedophilia scandal was my biggest crisis with the institutional church. Our pastor made a fund-raising call on us during that time. He let me yell at him for 40 minutes about what was going on and why I was refusing to give. He apologized to the whole parish for what had happened and he did it with great dignity. He was successful with me because he fully understood how I felt as a pediatrician, entrusted with the health of young people.

My other big crisis of faith came before we had children. I had two consecutive miscarriages early on. I got really angry because I thought that would keep happening. I shook my fist at heaven. I could deal with not getting pregnant but not the fact that my body would betray me every chance it had.

I went to a fertility specialist at Penn who was Italian. We had every test done, and then we had the appointment where we got the results. He shook our hands and said, "You're both very healthy. Now go home and have a lot of babies." I said, "Wait a minute. We've waited months to see you. How can you say that?"

I interrogated him for a half hour. He said to us that now is the time to take a deep leap of faith. "I know you don't believe me. But there is nothing else I can do."

His exact words were "leap of faith." I said, "Those are really hard words." He said, "I know, but you have to do it."

How could God give me incredible fertility but not the means to carry to term? It tested my faith and then somehow reaffirmed it and I came back to it. I came to peace with God and the Lord before we tried again. I had to resolve my anger before we tried again.

I got pregnant a couple of months later. And now we have three healthy, wonderful kids. But first I came to realize that God has his own plan and I often just don't get it.