



Monique Coldberg - Catholic Student Union



Although I was raised in the Catholic Church from the earliest days of my life, my faith journey was fairly static and uneventful. Like every good Catholic family, we attended Mass weekly and participated in all of the sacraments available to us, but my pre-college faith was immature — although at the time I thought nothing could have shaken it! In a certain sense, I found my faith life unchallenging: I didn't experience any serious obstacles in faith, but I also didn't have anything pushing me to strive for something deeper. However, during my sophomore year of college, serious difficulties began to arise, and I was wholly unprepared.

As I entered college, surrounding myself with people of faith wasn't a priority of mine. I began to develop friendships with some good people, but as with many college students, they were atheists who didn't have a positive view of religion or the Catholic Church. (Looking back, I know that they cared about me, and I have much to thank them for. Yet, in those dark years or early college, I should have been turning to the Lord, and I had no one to help me do that.) It was in the midst of these relationships that some traumatic events occurred in my life. Without a faith community to offer support, I became utterly crippled in my ability to live well; I was stripped of faith with only atheist friends to turn to for comfort. I eventually considered myself to be agnostic, with the view that people of faith were misguided and uninformed. I was blind to the depths of my spiritual poverty.

Because of the change in my demeanor, in the spring semester of 2012, my parents forced me to go to the Catholic Student Union's (CSU's) Spring Retreat by attempting to bribe my friends to go in the hopes that I would follow. I obliged under the condition that I would never have to attend another retreat if I decided that it was an unbearable weekend. They agreed to my terms...

My mentality upon arriving at the retreat was one of survival — making it through the weekend, tell my parents I had a miserable time, and then never have to face another boring, ignorance-filled camping trip. Oh! The singing was enough to make me go insane! I felt alone and isolated amongst a sea of overly cheerful "Jesus-lovers". I did not think I would make it through the first night until I saw some men dressed in these gray uniform shirts. I inquired as to whom they were and was informed that they were staff members for CSU and religious Brothers with the Brotherhood of Hope. "Huh, interesting... At least these guys are probably educated," I thought to myself.

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While I considered myself agnostic, I thoroughly enjoyed great religious conversation and debate. So, I walked over to the first available Brother and introduced myself. (Little did I know that this conversation would spark the most important relationship in my life to date and begin the long journey to conversion, but we'll get to that later!) For two hours this Brother engaged in deep debate with me on anything and everything I could think of. While I was unchanged in my ways, I was completely satisfied with our discussion. His depth of knowledge and spirituality moved me so deeply;

I thought to myself, "I could be Catholic again if I could know and feel the Lord like him." Unfortunately, back then I thought I was completely incapable of having a relationship with God because of the traumatic experiences that led me to agnosticism. How could God want someone as broken as me? Oh silly me...

Well, I survived retreat (if that isn't already obvious). Life continued, and retreat was quickly forgotten... but not for long. The Brother that I had conversed with at the Spring Retreat contacted me some weeks later and invited me to chat again. I could not pass up an opportunity to debate, so I got together with him and had another fantastic conversation. He challenged me to attend "Spirit Nights" (CSU's weekly catechetical meeting), and over time, our talks became a regular thing. Change was slow, almost unnoticeable, but that Brother and some of the friends I made in the CSU community were unwavering. Despite their persistence, I never suspected that their efforts were an attempt to convert me; in fact, their continued love was simply an



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attempt to show me the love of Christ. My junior year, I was asked to assist in the retreats as a small group leader. This took me by complete surprise, considering my theological position, but I was so indebted to the Brother and CSU that I accepted the position. It was around this time that I tried to pray again, started reading about the Saints, and began to read books on faith, but nothing was quite working yet.

The fall of my senior year I was asked to be a Retreat Producer (a behind-the-scenes student leader for the retreat). I was SO nervous! I was still an agnostic, but I

owed so much to CSU that I did my best to serve the community... and I am glad that I did! It was on that retreat that I knew I had to try to give my life to God more fully. There was something so true and real about the Eucharist in adoration that Saturday night... I didn't understand it yet, but I knew that I had to strive for something more with the Lord. I met with the Brother, and he continued to push me to pray and seek the Lord in my daily life. In my mind I had been trying for over a year (You know, isn't it enough just to give up all of your bad habits and lifestyle? What else did I have left to do?), and the Lord had yet to reveal Himself to me.

I grew frustrated and almost abandoned my mission to become Catholic again. I made the decision to give my all as a last attempt to know God. I learned from CSU that the only way to be in complete communion with God one must surrender oneself completely to the Lord, something I had yet to do. So, what did I have left to lose? All of my prayers consisted of me asking for revelation, but I was afraid to surrender any vision I had of what that might look like and when that might be.

On January 4th, 2014, I was reading a Church document called the *Donum Vitae*, and before I knew it, I was sobbing the most glorious tears of joy. Reading about how the Church sees the dignity of humankind, I made the connection to how the community that I had been brought into really lives out that sense of dignity. The fullness of God's loves broke into my spiritual poverty. Everything made sense. I felt God, I knew Him, and I had always known Him. The next retreat was later that month and for the first time, I experienced God in EVERYTHING. This was not some retreat high; this was the most real acknowledgment of God's overpowering love and presence in our lives — in MY life. He never wanted for me to abandon Him; He always wanted me to know that He loved me no matter what I had done, but out of what I thought was respect for the Church, I left it. Now I understood that what I had failed to understand so many years ago was His undying forgiveness.

With continued guidance and support from the community, I was able to grow in conviction for my newly acquired faith, and I am proud to say that it has only grown stronger since. The Lord so consumes my life that now I have become a conduit of Christ to others. My hope is that I am an effective source of inspiration to others so that they, too, may experience the joy of the Lord! Through my work as the Intramural Sports Committee Chair this year, I am able to be a natural witness to Christ's love to people on the fringes of the faith. I know that I have so much left to learn and grow, but without a doubt, I know that it would have taken

much longer to rediscover Christ without the community and retreats at CSU. In my three years with CSU I have certainly experienced the Lord loving me in my own spiritual poverty, and I have witnessed Him do the same thing for countless others who have been changed by the love this community has to offer. Now, I am constantly seeking how the Lord desires to send me out to the people of the world in order to share His love with others.

I will always be eternally grateful to CSU, and I wish with all of my heart that this community can continue to grow and be a source of light to those seeking truth.

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