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### *The Unsearchable Ways of God*

Having taken the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience in a Roman Catholic diocesan order, my steps were set in the logical direction prepared by my youth. Raised in a strong Catholic home, educated in Catholic schools for sixteen years, and trained by six years of convent life, I lived with an eagerness to serve God as a teacher. This desire did not change when I left the convent in 1969. Two years later, I married a man whose background was strikingly similar, including four years in the seminary and a commitment to teaching. Yet, despite these roots, God's unsearchable ways set me on a new path which brought me face to face with truth in the Person of His Son, Jesus Christ.

#### **Early Years**

While God's ways are a mystery to me, His grace is unmistakable as I reflect back on my life at age fifty in the year 1995. The third in a family of four, I shared a relatively stable home environment around the alcoholism of my father. My mother worried continuously, particularly about finances and my father's condition between the two to three jobs he worked. Mass and Communion, rosaries, novenas and other special devotions to Mary, the Sacred Heart, the Infant of Prague, St. Joseph, St. Anthony, St. Christopher and others were rituals of our daily life. When our family home was honored by our parish with the rotating statue of Mary, daily rosary on our knees and other devotional prayers were intensified. My mother took church rules seriously. Fasting and abstinence for Advent and Lent and meatless Fridays were carefully observed. The fat of bacon or gravy from meat was scrupulously avoided in meal preparation during these times. Obtaining indulgences and purchasing Masses for the deceased was performed as a means of shortening time in purgatory. There was a heaviness in our home, yet there was a stability regarding the life-long commitment of marriage, attendance at church and association with only Catholics as friends and even acquaintances. The few extended family

members that violated these patterns were rarely seen, spoken of infrequently, and their marriage ceremonies were not attended.

### Religious Life

Until I was in my twenties, I was never inside a non-Roman Catholic Church. Religious and priests were held in high esteem, thought to be both holier and wiser than the laity. A cousin, Vin, entered the Marianist brotherhood at age 15, a decision held above the strong marriage relationships in our family. Vin influenced his two younger sisters, Sue and Peg, who later entered the Ursuline convent. Two years after Vin's youngest sister entered the convent, I made the same decision, to the delight of my family. The diocesan order known as the Congregation of Sisters of St. Joseph, which had taught me all through elementary and high school, would enable me to fulfill my dream of going to college and of becoming a teacher.



First year as a postulant, Mary visiting with her family

This decision to become a religious was supported especially by my mother. It was a matter of pride and honor for the family. At the time I entered in 1963, the rule was that I would never return home. As a postulant, communication with family was monitored (letters written home and received from home were read) and strict rules were in place for the years of training. After the first year, a bridal ceremony followed by the cutting of my hair and dressing in full restrictive habit ushered me into the Novitiate. I was now Sister Mary Dolora. I spent a year away from college for serious formation.

During this year, I was indoctrinated in the proper manner of thought, speech and behavior for a professed religious. For example silence, limitations regarding with whom I could talk and when, and not being able to attend my sister Carol's wedding began to raise questions regarding the purpose of such restrictions. Learning obedience involved such practices as falling on one's knees to ask for penance when there was an infraction of the rules. On one occasion, I personally struggled when this humiliating practice was imposed on me because I had talked to a lonely older sister during infirmity duty. By the end of the third year, massive change was sweeping the Roman Catholic Church and some of it reached our small diocesan order. The year before my class was to begin self-flagellation as a means to higher spirituality, the practice was discontinued. By my second year in the novitiate, even my class was vested with the surprising responsibility of designing a much less confining habit. Rules were examined at a special congregation meeting of all the superiors. Soon, the hated ban on visiting home was lifted.



Mary, in the new less restrictive habit

### **Arbitrary Change**

With all of the change, questions about the significance of arbitrary rules began to concern me. How could these rules be so important one day and dismissed the next? There were abuses during the changes that reimposed some disciplines and older sisters in authority saw major problems developing. An example occurred during my first full year of teaching at a parish assignment. Word of “friendly” parties involving priests and nuns, which included dancing and frivolity, got back to the motherhouse and our local parish convent was verbally chastised and watched.

In addition, permission I had been given to visit a wonderful family in the parish was withdrawn. I found this particularly troubling since the wife had grown up on my street and her husband, George, had multiple sclerosis that paralyzed him from the neck down. I was able to share many things with them and their three children, most importantly, a listening ear, laughter and tears. The witness of love in this family left a great impression on me. Being unable to visit made no sense. Later that same year, when one of my sixth grade students, Jeff, sustained a serious head injury, only plaintive pleas from his mother enabled me to tutor him in the hospital during his long recovery. At no time was there any clear basis for the arbitrary rule changes, only a fear of serious infractions. It was God's grace that enabled me to learn and move on from the situations with George and Jeff. Rules intended to produce holiness through behavior control were shallow in the face of real life challenges.

### **A Leave of Absence**

In 1969, near the end of my first full year in a parish teaching assignment, I seriously considered a leave of absence from religious life. Prior to this year, leaving the convent after taking vows would have meant failure or disgrace. However, now the request to take a year to evaluate one's vocation was acceptable. While I was not the only one thinking this way, I was the first from my class of nine to solicit a meeting with the Mother Superior.

I know my family was disappointed, but I did not focus on their approval. Instead, I determined to move forward from the confinement of convent life to an environment that would foster personal query. It was June of 1969. I had only the clothes on my back and a small savings from high school employment that my parents kept in my name. After two weeks at home, I attended Ohio State University with another convent sister and then took a teaching position in Chicago, moving into a large inner city home with a civil rights leader, Margaret Ellen Traxler, also a nun. I shared a room with a classmate from the convent and we lived in the home with other nuns who worked with Margaret Ellen. After a sheltered convent life, that summer of '69 and the year that followed opened my eyes to all the “flavor” of the late sixties--

war protests, racial tensions, alcohol, drugs, free sex, undisciplined hours, discussions of Eastern mystical philosophies--in a volatile large city. Moral standards learned in my home and the grace of God, which I didn't recognize until much later, protected me both physically and spiritually. Many around me from similar backgrounds were choosing self-destructive life styles.

After seven months, I moved to an apartment near the University of Chicago. At the Newman Center, I met many former nuns and priests, some leaving their orders in larger numbers, some remaining but **influenced even more by** various interpretations of "truth". Mass and communion were performed around coffee tables, the social gospel was prevalent, civil rights was a banner. People who were clear about what they believed and where they were going were not to be found. Causes were in, morality was out. Through all of this, I knew I would never return to the convent. I made the final break from my vows and order.

### **Marriage**

When I recall the situations I was in during these years in Chicago, I marvel at God's hand of protection. His care for me included living in Hyde Park, a racially mixed community, during a time of much racial tension, and University of Chicago parties where free sex, drugs, bazaar thinking with drugged or duped minds, and generally loose living abounded. After dating a number of relatively stable men in such an environment, I met my husband, Bernie, an ex-seminarian. It was early in 1970 and I was twenty-five. With comparable backgrounds giving us much in common, we dated only a few weeks before talking of marriage. However, we took a full year to become acquainted with our families in Ohio and Wisconsin and to lay careful plans for our wedding.

For our marriage ceremony, we choose the church where I taught my last year in the convent rather than my family parish. My Superior from that assignment was there as well as George's widow and others I knew from my teaching. Both Bernie and I were very family oriented and decided to settle in Michigan, within a day's drive of our parents. Here we began our family and lived as active members of St. Peter's Parish for five and one half years.

### **Times of Testing**

Our two children were ages two and four months when my mother was diagnosed with an inoperable brain tumor. Frequent travel from Michigan to Ohio during her rapid decline required many arrangements and a doubling of duties for my husband. She died less than six months after being diagnosed. A year later, I was six weeks pregnant with our third child when I received a call from my sister. **When our father failed to show up for dinner at her home, she found him dead in bed.** Throughout this difficult time, Bernie was the Lord's provision of support.

Six months after my father's death, we moved to the Milwaukee area. During the following six months, Bernie's mother had open heart surgery during which she experienced a partially disabling stroke, our third daughter was born, and Bernie went through two difficult job changes. It seemed as though our lives were in constant upheaval. Among my part-time jobs was a position as religious education director for a large parish in our suburban community. It was here that I was introduced to values clarification, a move away from the clear moral traditions and doctrines of Roman Catholicism, and the diminished use of the sacrament of confession. These practices and an introduction to increasingly liberal teachings of men like

Daniel Maguire of Marquette University and Archbishop Rembert Weakland produced growing confusion.

In some cases I seriously questioned these new trends and in other cases I accepted them as a positive new direction. It was “in” to be a part of the new ideas. All three of our daughters were baptized, made their first communion and were taught reconciliation (formerly the sacrament of confession), although it was not practiced at our parish. During the eleven years we were at this parish, I taught and wrote curriculum for CCD classes and/or directed religious education programs.



**Mary with her three daughters**

### **Uprooting**

The last year and a half **at this parish**, Bernie and I taught high school confirmation classes together in our home. Ironically, God used this program and the man who directed it to complete the groundwork that would dislodge our deep roots in Roman Catholicism. When the director gave us and our students each a Catholic Bible, he could not have known that he had provided not simply a resource but a vehicle of liberation. This was the beginning of our study of the Word of God.

The Confirmation textbook given with the Bible presented not doctrine, but the social gospel--a system of works that were to be the sanctifying process for the “Christian”. Homilies were no better. Talks with our pastor about concerns went nowhere. Serious moral situations that surfaced in discussions with our students made it clear there was no spiritual foundation for decision-making. Again by God's grace, we were directed to turn to the Bible. A growing discomfort with what appeared to be a course headed for destruction fostered a desire in me for a much more conservative position. Strong family values and the moral foundation we hoped to pass on to our students as well as our daughters was no longer sustained by our parish church.

Our oldest daughter, Laura, was in confirmation classes this same year with another couple. She too was experiencing great difficulty with the material, particularly the way students ignored more traditional moral positions. At the same time, the public schools where all three of our daughters attended, proposed liberal sex education curriculums. Concern about this material introduced me to a whole new set of friends who were confident in their beliefs and what they wanted for their children. Lowering standards to “fit the times” was not in their thinking. Working with this group of people in a difficult fight for the welfare of our children brought Bernie and me into more and more contact with the Word of God.

## **Unchangeable Truth**

We were invited to join Bible studies and prayer groups and Bernie and I became convicted of the authority of the Word of God. Bernie proposed lessons based on the Bible and the Nicene Creed for our confirmation group and they were approved by the director. We offered Bible-based curriculum to replace muddled thinking and fruitless discussions with God's unchangeable principles. When questions arose that we could not deal with, we found experts through our new Christian friends. One spoke on the authority of the Word of God and one addressed issues regarding the occult and Satanism. These were not priests or religious but lay persons, who seemed to be **saved by faith in Jesus Christ alone, and** who knew and held to the truth of Scripture alone.

Although I cannot point to one specific day that I recognized and accepted Jesus Christ as my Savior, the truth of His Word was taking root in my life by the summer of 1989. In June, abiding by the sound advice of the man who would be our first local church pastor, "*wives be in subjection to your own husbands that, if any obey not the word, they also may without the word be won by the behavior of their wives*" (1 Peter 3:1), I asked Bernie's permission to attend worship service at a Bible-based church. He said yes!

## **Conviction**

Our daughters were fifteen, thirteen, and eleven at the time. I knew there would be questions and I worried about the affect on our family unity. We attended both Catholic and Christian churches for most of the summer. Bernie tried the Christian church at my request for my birthday in July. His permission for me and agreement to attend with me were clear indications that God was involved in the circumstances of our lives.

Another dramatic example was a Sunday early in the summer when I suddenly could not receive communion at a Catholic Mass. The stark realization that I did not believe this could be the "real" body and blood as taught by the Catholic Church was a startling and profound faith conviction. To have gone forward would have been hypocrisy. I realized that eating the body and blood according to the Bible meant much more, an identification with the Person of Jesus Christ. It did not make sense that He would be present in me at communion and not there the rest of the time. There was no magic or mystery. The words of the priest said to have the power of transforming bread and wine were a denial of the sufficiency of the work of the cross. Jesus said, "It is finished" ( John 19:30). Communion is a memorial of what He has accomplished. His command was to "*Do this in remembrance of Me*" (Luke 22: 19).

The Mass prayers also stuck in my throat. Why was sacrifice still necessary? Did not the Scripture say? "*He is able also to save them to the uttermost that come unto God by Him, seeing He ever liveth to make intercession for them*"; He "*needeth not daily ... to offer up sacrifice ... for this He did once for all when He offered up Himself.*" (Hebrews 7: 25 & 27). The "unbloody sacrifice", as the Mass was defined, contradicted what both the Old and New Covenant taught, "*without shedding of blood there is no forgiveness*" (Hebrews 9: 22). He had "*offered one sacrifice for sins for all time*" and "*by the one offering has perfected those who are sanctified*" (Hebrews 12 & 14). The veil of the Holy of Holies has been torn in two. Man has access to the throne of God.

The revelation regarding communion initiated one of many lively spiritual discussions in our family during this time. This was completely out of the ordinary, yet I know now that the power of the Word of God was effecting a spiritual revolution in our lives regarding the Roman Catholic teaching concerning the Person and the power of the Lord Jesus Christ.

By August we were no longer attending Mass, which we saw as a denial of the finished work of Calvary. We missed the liturgical rituals, weekly participation in communion, and familiar contacts. Neither extended family nor Catholic friends understood what we were doing; yet we were convicted. Much to our surprise, when we told the religious education director at our now former parish, he asked us to continue teaching our confirmation group through their second year because “good teachers were hard to find” and our class had been positively responsive.

At Christmas we wrote a letter to our relatives and friends regarding our conversion. This initiated distress, anger and painful distancing. The significance of Matthew 19:29 which had been quoted so many times in relation to religious life suddenly became clear: *“And every one that hath forsaken houses, or brethren, or sisters, or father, or mother, or wife, or children, or lands, for my sake, shall receive an hundredfold, and shall inherit everlasting life.”*

In my own inadequacy to put into words what it meant to be saved, I invited a Christian woman over to explain salvation to our daughters. It was our youngest, Allison’s first exposure to the Gospel. Our oldest, Laura, showed me a journal entry she had made recording the day she believed on Jesus Christ as her **Savior**, more than a year earlier. She had a circle of Christian friends at school and was regularly studying the Bible. Our second daughter, Sarah, later shared that she had first heard the Gospel at a summer camp two years before. Although she believed what Jesus had done for her, there was little impact in her life because she had no training in the Word of God when camp was over.

## **Conversion**

God’s intervention leading the five of us out of Roman Catholicism is nothing short of a miracle, the miracle of conversion in the life of every believer. I have since realized that the more than forty years I spent in the Catholic Church, faithfully attending rituals and going through extensive religious training, did not bring me to a knowledge of the Gospel. I was a sinner hopelessly lost without God’s perfect provision. *“Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures;... was buried, and...rose again the third day according to the Scriptures”* (1Corinthians 15:3-4). This and this alone saved me. Nothing can be added to the work of Jesus Christ nor can His work be re-enacted to bring forgiveness and grace. God prepared and drew us to Himself through His Word, the Bible, not through religious traditions and institutions.

## **Believer’s Baptism**

Our family’s continued spiritual transformation brought us to seek baptism by immersion in May of 1993. Knowing that baptism is not efficacious (i.e., it does not wash away sin and establish relationship with God, as taught by Catholicism), we initially did not think it necessary to be baptized. The first Christian church we attended baptized infants in the context of the a “covenant family relationship”. We questioned this practice because it was not directed by Scripture. In 1993, Bernie and I met a pastor from North Carolina who showed us from Scripture that baptism was an important public witness and a matter of obedience. Again, the Lord was

teaching us apart from a local church, establishing for us the authority of His Word. We were “*to examine the Scriptures daily*”, using the Word of God as the authority in our lives (Acts 17:11). After presenting what we had learned to our daughters, we discovered that our oldest, Laura, who was at college in Pennsylvania, desired to be baptized and was praying about it since her mission trip the previous summer. Our younger daughters, Sarah and Allison, after study and prayer also sought baptism. We prepared as a family, writing our first testimonies for the ceremony. Our family agreed that baptism was an important public confirmation of our conversion and call by the Lord.

### **The Walk of Faith**

And our story continues until the Lord calls us home. God's impact in my life and on our family stems from our commitment to prayer, study of the Word, fellowship as believers, and our response to His daily direction in our lives. However, the issue of eternal salvation is settled. There is peace, hope and joy in this certainty. The times of loneliness and estrangement after leaving the Catholic Church have diminished with time, but are not gone, especially because our extended families are still Catholic. Knowing the truth, we long for salvation for those we love. Sharing with relatives and others is often sadly devoid of eternal perspective.

After we left our first Christian church, we again went through a period of wilderness, disappointment in relationships and concern for differences of scriptural interpretation and application among believers. However, the Lord never left us without His peace. Answers were available. We understood that membership in the true church was only possible by rebirth (John 3:5). Finding a local church where we could be equipped to serve the Lord would be accomplished in God's time as we found a pastor committed to preaching the entire counsel of the Scriptures. The Bible was given by God to be read and understood, hindered only by our laziness or unwillingness to allow the Holy Spirit to teach us all things (John 14:26). Believers and pastors were put into our lives to encourage and support us, and when they were removed Christ was always sufficient.

Distinguishing between the Word of God and the traditions of men has become a way of life. Recognizing that the standards of God do not change with the times and that His truth is completely trustworthy did not alleviate the challenges of our time. But it provided stability, direction and hope. Jesus Christ is God's Word and the Word is Truth. If I do not live the victorious life of a Christian, it is because of my failure to live drawing upon the resources continually available to me in Christ.

### **In Summary**

The testimony of any Christian is the finished work of Jesus in His death, burial and resurrection accepted by faith as the only thing necessary for salvation. Each story, however, is as unique as the individual because it is always God reaching out to the individual, exactly where each one is. I am grateful for the deep roots of Roman Catholicism in my life, for my parents who gave me physical life and the home and training that laid a strong moral foundation. However, it is God in His infinite wisdom Who “*causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose*” (Romans 8:28). And His purpose is to choose, to call, to justify and to sanctify--to conform to the image of His Son (Romans 8:29-30). I marvel at the ways of our God who could transform the first forty-four years of my life as a Roman Catholic, releasing me from the bondage of a religious system

steeped in the traditions of men, and bringing me into the freedom of relationship with Jesus Christ. It can only be summarized simply by God's amazing grace, for by grace His servant was saved through faith; and that not of myself, it is the gift of God; not a result of works, that no one should boast. For I am His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that I should walk in them (Ephesians 2:8-10).

### **An Addendum**

Some years have passed since the writing of this testimony. God's faithfulness and the need for diligence in living according the Word of Truth are the on-going theme of life in relationship with Jesus Christ. Being saved from the penalty of sin the moment one believes and being accepted by the Father in Christ with His perfect righteousness, does not remove the daily struggle to walk in the Spirit so as not to fulfill the desires of the flesh (Galatians 5:16). In times of temptation, trial, and testing, the Holy Spirit will bring to remembrance Scripture we have studied. God's grace and completely adequate provision in every circumstance enables us by the power of the Spirit to live according to His commands and grow in holiness. His grace is always sufficient as He directs what is impossible apart from Him: *"Study to show thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth"* (2 Timothy 2:15).

Personal study of the Word continues to be a part of the lives of each family member. It is a blessing of unity and strength as challenges increase. Our daughters, son-in-law and grandchildren have stability because of **their focus on** God's unchangeable truth while so **many** in society **seem** to be lost in a futility of self-focus and "anything goes". My husband, Bernie, is the spiritual head of our home, seeking to direct us in wisdom gained from biblical knowledge. **He runs his own business and conducts a weekly men's Bible study in our home and is involved in the adult Bible teaching in our local church.** Daily decisions are made more and more in light of a growing understanding of God's purposes and the need for a believer to do all for His glory.

In my own life, **I am primarily a homemaker, a helpmate to my husband in his business and wherever else needed. In our local church I assist with ministries and disciple women. Our home is** a place of hospitality and times of fellowship with believers as well as opportunities to share with unbelievers. There is balance in life as a believer that reflects joy, peace, and fruitfulness, the "natural" result of living according to God's purposes.

Knowing God's will and living according to it is a daily challenge. Being faithful is dependent on continual trust in His way, *"Trust in the Lord with all thine heart, and lean not unto thine own understanding. In all thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths"* (Proverbs 3: 5-6). It is my prayer that all who read this testimony will be drawn to a knowledge of Jesus Christ. He is the Truth that sets every person free to live life abundantly here on earth and for all eternity (John 10: 10). *"Not that we are sufficient of ourselves...but our sufficiency is of God...And God is able to make all grace abound toward you, that ye, always having all sufficiency in all things, may abound to every good work"* (2 Corinthians 3:5 and 9:8). *"Now unto Him that is able to keep you from falling, and to present you faultless before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy, to the only wise God, our Savior, be glory and majesty, dominion and power, both now and forever. Amen."* (Jude 24-25)