

If someone were to ask you the question “who are you” how would you respond?

Odds are it might depend. You might say an American. A family person. A Republican. A Democrat. A hard worker. And while all of these things are true, there is hopefully one thing that stands above the rest, and that is the fact that we are a Catholic. What that means is we have said “yes” to following God, meaning He is at the center of our lives, and all else needs to revolve around Him, being guided by Him. And when that happens, we can prepare for the day when we will meet Him.

Some years ago, a young man named Jeremy Langord, who worked as an editor for the Catholic publishing Company, Loyola Press. At the time, Jeremy’s world revolved around his career. In his story, he writes that ever since he can remember he enjoyed books, and growing up with a family of readers, he grew up with the belief that books can change the world and put us in touch with the most significant questions and enduring answers.

Following his graduation from Notre Dame with a degree in English and philosophy, he worked in a bookstore for minimum wage and sent out

resumes to publishers hoping to land a job as an editor. He finally got a call from the director of Loyola Press, asking him to interview for an editorial position. The pay was low and he wasn't sure he wanted to edit religious books, but growing up a Cubs fan he loved the idea of being near Wrigley Field and getting paid to read. So he did the interview, they made an offer, and he accepted on the spot.

After his first few months, his boss walked into his office and said "Langford, I've got an important project for you. It's a book called 'The Catholic Tradition Before and After Vatican II: 1878-1993,' and I think you're ready for it. At that point he had only taken an editing class at the University of Chicago, assisted other editors with their work, and handled only one project on his own. His only fear now was that his boss would figure out he did not know much at all about the Catholic tradition and had no right to edit the book.

Throughout that fall and winter, he devoted most of his time and energy to that project. He was determined to learn about the Catholic tradition while making the book letter-perfect.

The day before the project was due to the printer, Jeremy took the galley pages home for one last review. He ended up pulling an all-nighter.

The next morning, overly tired and grumpy, he waited in the snow for the 152 Addison bus to pick him up for work. As the dimerized flakes fell with increasing intensity, he retreated deeper inside himself. Eventually the groan of an approaching bus startled him back to the moment at hand, and he squinted to make out the number “152” against the blurry backdrop of the Chicago skyline. Soon he’d be on his way to work, and soon after that he’d be mailing the manuscript to the printer.

When the bus finally pulled up to the corner, he saw a middle-aged man coming forward with an elderly woman clutching his arm. He thought about shoving he way past them, but decided his kind act for the day would be gettin gout of the way so this other man could perform his kind act for the day. Within a minute, the man had deposited his delicate cargo on the corner and re-boarded the bus. Jeremy started to follow in his path when he heard the elderly woman plead, “Oh my, it’s so icy today, I don’t know If I’ll be able to make it to the hospital just down the street.”

It was one of those moments when you want to pretend you did not hear a plea for help so that you can just go about your business, Jeremy thought to himself, but he had in fact heard it.

With one foot on the first step of the bus and the other on the curb, he looked at the half-smiling driver, then at his watch, and finally at the gray-haired woman.

In his bag sat the typeset pages to “The Catholic Tradition.” Chapters on peace and justice seemed to be whispering to him, “What are you going to do?”

In a great John Wayne-style moment, he looked at the bus driver and said “go on without me.” He smiled, shut the door, and zoomed off. He turned back and offered the woman his arm as the exhaust fumes engulfed the two of them.

“Thank you so much young man” the elderly woman said in a half-fake tone of surprise. “Normally I make this walk by myself, but today it’s too dangerous.”

“No problem” said Jeremy as he stifled a grumble.

Saint Joseph’s Hospital was just down the street from his apartment. He passed it many times. But that day it seemed miles away as measured by their cautiously teeny steps on the snow-hidden glaze of ice. Gradually, he gave up trying to sneak peeks at his watch and fantasizing about throwing this woman over his shoulder and running her to her destination. He simple resolved to enjoy his time with this seemingly fragile soul. “My name is Frances” she offered.

Salutations out of the way, Frances and Langford chatted a little about the weather, his job as an editor, and their mutual love of Chicago. About halfway to the hospital, Frances asked, “Can we stop her a minute so I can catch my breath?” Though he wanted to say sarcastically, “Gosh I’m glad you said it first because we’ve been sprinting like marathon runners”! He thought it better to hold onto her arm and tell her to take her time.

Without warning, she looked at him and asked “Are you Catholic?”

The question caught him off guard. He'd been privately asking himself the same question for such a long time that it sounded foreign coming from somebody else's mouth. He felt his canned answer making its way to his lips. "Yes I am" he finally responded.

From the back of his mind sprang a haunting question he once heard at an Easter Mass: "If you were on trial for being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you?" The answer had continually eluded him. Maybe Frances's "I can tell" was pointing to some truth about himself that Jeremy didn't ordinarily acknowledge.

They continued their journey, but his mind sat cold and numb as he pondered what he means when he says "I am Catholic."

They finally reached the doors of the hospital, and he wished his new friend well. "I hope it's nothing serious and you're going to be okay."

"Oh" she said delighted. "I'm fine; I just come here once a week to volunteer, you know, cheer the patients up."

He stood awkwardly in awe of her as she read the surprise on his face.

He couldn't help but to ask Frances, "Are you Catholic?" To which she happily answered, "Yes, I am."

Somehow her answer sounded different from his...stronger and more confident he thought.

After learning down to hug Frances goodbye, Jeremy headed back to his bus stop. It hadn't been terribly long since he was last there, but everything about his morning had changed.

As he caught the next bus, he replayed Frances's question hundreds of times: "Are you Catholic?" It was no longer a theoretical matter. Through her word and actions, she challenged him to examine how his being Catholic meshes with the all-too-often sloppy details of his daily life.

On that cold winter day, he felt a powerful warmth that had been stoked by the humanity and Catholic conviction embodied in his unexpected companion, Frances. And as he mailed "The Catholic Tradition" typeset

pages in enough time to meet the publishers deadline, he smiled to think that he'd come a few steps closer to understanding the message contained in its pages.

He didn't see Francis again, but Jeremy reflects that her challenge continues to take on deeper meaning each time he confidently responds, "Yes, I'm Catholic."

We are Catholic too. And the start of Advent gives us the chance to think about what that means. Both Jeremy and Francis were good people; but on the bus that day, one had her life centered in Christ, the other hopefully now got there because of her.

In our lives, everything has to center around Jesus as our heavenly star much like the star that guided the Magi to see the newborn Christ child. And it's also up to us to help others do that too.

With respect to a life centered on Christ, Jesus in the Gospel uses the example of the stars falling; the sun, the moon and the stars will all be in disarray we are told. Yes there will probably be some incredibly shocking

things that happen on earth in it's last moments. But this Gospel isn't just about the end moments of earth; it applies to us here and now. And I think a takeaway for us is to ask yourself what is your north star? Meaning if you were to be asked what the core of your identity is, or what matters the most to you, how would you answer that? Some, like Jeremy before he met Francis, might say my career, my financial stability. Others might say my family, my country, my work ethic. The point is a great many people would aspire to things that are noble, and to which there is nothing wrong with such as a good job, career, family life. But, Jesus is the star, all these other things have go go around Him. Jesus is the fixed point; and as Saint Benedict Joseph's life is a testament too, everything else went around that. Once we get that point, it's not as if we can't have a good career, family life, and enjoy our life on this earth, but everything else will be guided. Take our careers. Jesus says we should be charitable and give what we have to the poor and follow him. While we can have possessions, when we get this fact, we can look at how we spend our money and our time - are we generous to others and there for our loved ones, or do we become selfish? Jeremy's Catholic faith, even if he didn't know it, helped him at that moment to choose to help a person in need. That's what happens when our lives center around Jesus. Some order their lives about being in control or being

noticed by others and their ego. Jesus though washes the feet of his apostles and says he who humbles himself will be exalted. So if Jesus is center in our lives, we can look at the areas of our lives where we maybe need to be less of a control freak, or if we are worried too much about recognition. Maybe the family is what matters most to us, and family is important - we have a whole feast coming up dedicated to the Holy Family. But Jesus says unless you love me more than your mother and father, more than your very life, you are not worthy of me. Family like I said last week has tried to intervene in the lives of many of saints, but when Christ is your center, it allows a person to hear His voice even if someone a family may try to dissuade someone from their vocation, and that leads a person to get married, or become a priest. Even if a person has a religious intuition as their north star, it can be a problem. Remember Paul was Saul, a very active Pharisee who loved his faith and the Temple, and Jesus told Him to change. If a person's life revolves around the Church and not Christ who created the Church, they may not see when there are problems (e.g., the recent scandals and some bishops who ignored criminal activity; or an unhealthy situation in a local parish). The point is that all of these things can be very good things - a career, our families, living the good life, but

none of them can be at the center of our lives, that has to be reserved for Christ.

One final note: how are you leading people? When people see us, they should see Jesus in their midst. My sense was Jeremy did when he saw Fran giving so selflessly of her time to help others at a hospital. So what does our way of life say to others both in our families and in greater society? What message do we send children about what matters most? When you add up the simple things we do over our lives by taking the family to Mass; by praying together; by doing acts of charity and caring for the less fortunate; and when you are willing to bring sins and struggles out in the open by talking about them, and letting your kids know they can talk about them with you, we lead people to Jesus. They understand His mercy and love, but also understand that following Him requires a response.

In a few weeks, we'll be gathered for the Christmas Eve Mass and again hear the words from Isaiah that the people who have walked in darkness have seen a great light. Christmas is a beautiful feast for us to celebrate each year where we recall how much God loves us that He became one of us. But the problem is as we look forward to when we will meet not the

infant but Christ the King, sometimes it's easy to walk in darkness because we lose our way. Christ though is always there to guide us home to Him, and to show us the way - we just need to know where to look. Our Gospel closes with Jesus saying: "Be vigilant at all times and pray that you have the strength to escape the tribulations that are imminent and to stand before the Son of Man." Those are all around us every day, some sinful, others just things we put our focus on that aren't meant to be at the center of our lives. Jesus is our center - so may we hear what He tells us in life, and realize He is with us for the journey by opening our eyes to see him and our ears to hear Him, remembering that when we do, He will lead us to heaven.