

As life goes on, it can be quite easy to get distracted or sidetracked. And that's because in our culture, we have our priorities messed up. Some kids from an early age are given the message they have to be perfect at everything, and what matters is the ideal school, then money and materialism. And as for God and the things that don't turn to ashes? The reality is for so many, God seems so far "out there" and life seems so long that we can get caught up to looking at God as the "break glass in case of emergency" or reduce God to semi-annual visits to Church with the occasional wedding or funeral sprinkled in.

A cynic might say "well that's just how it is" and give up. But that's not the attitude we can have if we take our faith seriously. As Pope Francis has said, the Church is a field hospital, and we are called to get out there into the world. The challenge is to find the right path and to re-order our lives.

Why do people leave the faith? For some it's how they were raised; others just focus more on the ways of the world and a message that is "do whatever you want."

Kathleen Laplante, in sharing her story on a website called “whyiamacatholic,” is a banker, writer and editor, who for 21 years now has been a Catholic after falling away from her faith.

In writing her story, she speaks of how she remembers it clearly. She and her husband decided to leave the Church, and they invited his Catholic parents over to justify themselves. It was 1990 and they recently had their first son. With him on her hip, she stood in front of my mother-in-law and addressed the topic of abortion. She asked, "Who does the Catholic Church think they are, telling me I can't have an abortion if I want one?"

Her in-laws were terror-stricken. They tried to explain the Faith and thought they should talk to a priest, but their minds were made up. The devil had seemingly won. How else, Kathleen reflects, could she have held the life from her own womb, and argue that she should be able to abort "it" if she wanted to?

The dichotomy of that scene alarms her now, but from her and her husband's misinformed view of the world, their thinking could not have been different. They were enslaved by the insidious messages of the

secular world. They hit all the hot-button topics of their generation, fulminating that "Women should be allowed to be priests. Gay couples should be able to live together and raise children. Confession is unnecessary. The idea that the Pope 'is king,' is archaic and ridiculous, and by the way, "Who is he to say we can't have premarital sex or use birth control?"

Their in-laws were disheartened to see them leave the Catholic Church for a Protestant one, but Kathleen and her husband were in "heaven." This Protestant congregation allowed women to preach, gay couples to live together, and anyone to receive "communion" any time, i.e. there was no confession. They did not (overtly) oppose abortion, and they were more hospitable. Kathleen says her and her husband's vagrant souls could not have wanted anything more – until that routine became too inconvenient and they stopped going to church again.

After her second son, Kathleen had an unexpected revolt against contraception. She knew something was wrong. Her husband wanted a vasectomy, but she would not agree. Nor would she agree to go back on the pill. The strain in their relationship loomed with oppression.

Simultaneously, her struggle with postpartum depression lingered on into major depression.

With serious illness at their relatively young age, disagreement about the love life, and no conjugal faith to draw upon, their nine-year marriage ended in divorce. She was resentful about being a mother who lacked emotional stamina and know-how for fulfilling that role. She was also limited in her care taking abilities due to her depression. So the two agreed our sons should live with their father, which for her was tough but what she knew at the time was best for her boys. She also struggled greatly with despair, contemplating taking her own life. But, she finally took God's hand, and when she did, she writes, He poured graces upon her. Along with leading her to outstanding medical help, He led her back to the Catholic Church. Her life has never been the same.

Ironically, her Unitarian friend was God's first catalyst in her return. Seeing how distraught Kathleen was after her divorce, she suggested she regroup at the Guest House of a local Abbey. Kathleen had no idea what an Abbey was, but she did know this one had affordable rates in a serene location.

While there, the few-but-oh-so-precious seeds, planted during her barren Catholic upbringing, came out of dormancy. They began to grow when Kathleen realized she was on Catholic ground. She discerned the importance of having her marriage annulled, and she asked one of the priests about it. That led to in-depth catechesis where they unraveled the ignorance, sinfulness, and confusion she had about contraception, freedom to marry, abortion, the value and dignity of life, motherhood, the dignity of being a woman, and more. Kathleen experienced a tremendous release of guilt, shame and confusion - "I was coming home" she says.

On October 7, 1997, the Feast of Our Lady of the Most Holy Rosary, she was formally received back into the Catholic Church. It was the foundation of her conversion, but not the end of it. The seeds of faith from her childhood continued to grow as she was catechized, spiritually directed, and guided in the practice of the Faith.

She no longer supports the use of contraception – and now she knows why. She no longer approves of abortion, and her sons clearly know her views on premarital sex and practicing purity in preparation for marriage. She defends the Church's teaching about the priesthood being reserved for

men only. The act of gay couples living together and raising families is no longer acceptable in her eyes.

She has been blessed to have her irreverent attitudes removed. She no longer says "I can connect with God any time, so I don't have to go to Mass." Instead, she draws upon the advice of her spiritual director -- "Don't say 'I have to go to Mass;' say 'I get to go to Mass.'" And that she does. She now goes to Sunday and daily Mass.

With a love for unborn babies and their mothers, Kathleen founded and coordinated an annual walkathon for expectant mothers in need of support for giving birth to their children. They held five walks and reached a grand total mark of \$17,000 for a local counseling center and shelter. Her relationships with her family, friends, and God, are strong. The Rosary is one of the most important tools she has, and she prays it almost every day. She is now a Benedictine Oblate at the Abbey where it all began. She no longer works in the corporate world, where she found it difficult to act morally. She bakes at the Abbey and does some writing and editing.

She is also at peace. Kathleen closes reflecting: "I am a Roman Catholic woman with no desire to be anything else. Christ replaced my hopelessness and disconnects with His joy and spiritual integration. The life I literally thought was hell, has become a foretaste of heaven. "Thanks be to God. He brought me home."

God wants us all to come home to Him and to be in heaven, but God also does not create robots. He gives us free will. But He also does not put us on earth alone. He puts us in Communion with one another. We are reminded of this at each Mass, in particular at the Eucharist. But we are also given a commission at the end of Mass - to truly be an agent of God's love in the world. To be a messenger. To grow closer to God, and to help others to do the same.

This week, we celebrate the Feast of the Nativity of John the Baptist. In His ministry, John pointed people to Christ; He prepares the way of the Lord. And as we look at him, I think we can be challenged to do two very important things: truly find conversion in ourselves, and the fortitude to proclaim the message of repentance and conversion to a world that really is not all that dissimilar from the world of John.

John was the son of a temple priest, Zechariah. And while Zechariah is a holy, just man, the same can't be said for the other priests and leaders around him. Herod was the leader of Israel, a man known for violence and corruption, who famously killed the innocents in an attempt to kill Jesus. Many of the other priests were simply political appointees, not truly holy people. The Temple had fallen into decadence and corruption. Some saw this though and said enough is enough. The prophets famously do this, as does a group of Jewish ascetics called the Essenes. John may likely have been part of this group. And so growing in holiness himself, John goes out to the desert and the river Jordan. The Jordan River was what the Israelites crossed when they entered the promised land, so there is some symbolism there. John baptized as part of a cleansing ritual. A person would traditionally wash before going to the Temple, but the deeper symbolism in John's baptism was you went out to the desert, and were baptized to be cleansed of sin. To become a new person. To be liberated from your past, and then enter into the promised land that is God's Kingdom.

For us, I think that has to be a starting point, and that is so counter-cultural these days. There are many churches out there that attract people like

Elizabeth because they have nice music, or a feel-good message, but they don't necessarily challenge people. It's difficult to take a hard look at oneself and to say "I have to change." It's very easy to become complacent or drift from day to day. But the Christian must always look deeper and have that balance, the balance that says yes, I am loved by God, but that love also requires a response. Which means we do an examination of conscience and look at our sins and name them. Whether it's a habitual struggle, sins of the flesh, gossiping, apathy, laziness or whatever it might be, we all have room for growth. And I think a big part of what that comes down to is asking oneself "do I have Christ on the front burner?" Or, is God like volume 12 in an encyclopedia set in my life? John remember lives his life pointing to Jesus - "He must increase, I must decrease," because it's never about him. This is why we celebrate his feast at the summer solstice; it's a reminder that on our own, we can only achieve so much - we always need Jesus and the light of God's love to truly fill us.

So once we have that interior conversion attitude down like Elizabeth did in going to that Abbey and meeting with a spiritual director and really looking at her life, we roll up our shirt sleeves and get to work. And the two big

ways we get to work in God's world are through words and actions that we also see in John's life.

With respect to actions, Elizabeth after her re-version got involved in the pro-life movement. Whether it's in our own families or our family of faith, we must always remember that what matters more than anything else is hearing the word of God and then doing it. From simple acts of charity like listening to a person, spending time with them, helping children with homework, donating to charity or volunteering, these are all simple ways we, like John the Baptist, can point to Christ.

Finally though, actions sometimes require evangelization. John the Baptist is ultimately martyred, as are so many Christians through the centuries.

And while we have freedom of speech, let's face it, there is a lot of intolerance out there because our message is counter cultural. As one of my favorite seminary professors put it, the state of affairs is that when you come home for Thanksgiving and say you are going to the seminary, family may look at you like your out of your mind, but when your brother introduces his girlfriend and announces they are moving in together they raise a toast. There's truth to that. When you speak about the sanctity of

human life in the womb, why we are against capital punishment, when you talk about marriage between a man and a woman, or say I do not support same sex couples adopting children, you'll offend people. A priest friend to me remarked a person up and walked right out of Mass when he did just that. But remember, the point is not to shame people. The point is not to get into a shouting match, which is more common these days especially on social media. The point is to challenge. Because our goal in life shouldn't be just to not offend someone, our goal should be the same as that of John - to help a person become a saint.

Zechariah at first doubted God's power, which is why for a time during Elizabeth's pregnancy he was unable to speak. But at John's birth, we are told in the Gospel that "his mouth was opened" after he writes the name on the tablet of John. He then speaks blessing God. That's what grace does - it frees us and allows us to also bless God and to proclaim him. Like Zechariah and his son, may we have that trust in God, and never fear proclaiming him to a world that needs to know him.