



The Witness of a Young Catholic: Finding and Returning to God After Drifting

Editor's Note: The Mindszenty Report received this essay from a young Catholic reader. We found the piece inspiring in this time of travail. The student asked to remain anonymous from fear of targeting—which says much about college campuses today, when the young are afraid to bear witness to their faith.

Almost six years after my conversion to Catholicism in high school in 2018, a wave of peace washed over me. A month before, I had joined my church's choir to feel closer to God and to lend my voice to proclaiming His greatness. Singing in this choir has been one of the most difficult things I have done in a while; I had grown used to singing with my lower register as a bass and baritone in every other choir.

Yet, when I first walked into the choir room, I stated that I could sing within my higher register, especially if it would help balance out the group. So, our director encouraged me to do just that. One Sunday I felt at peace as we performed a song. I had difficulty sight-reading and following along at first, but nailed my part during the performance at Mass. That piece served as a molehill allegory for my faith. While I ended up on a more difficult path than I expected, God guided me through it all.

Challenge was not the way I arrived at faith. During my junior year at a Jesuit high school, my conversion happened when I went on a Kairos retreat for one week. All the prior classes and practicums in faith had fallen on my deaf ears. It was the earnest testimonials of students and teachers, combined with

fruitful discussions, that led me to saying the words, "I think God is real," while feeling a gust of wind that trumpeted God's approval of my newfound faith. Within a year of that retreat, I entered the Church as a confirmed Catholic.

The Beauty of Creation

My motive at that time feels child-like as I write this article for you now: I felt enveloped in God's love almost every day after that moment of conversion. The beauty of His creation struck me in the nature around me, the brilliant shows of the sun at the start and end of each day, and the snowy mountains whenever I would go skiing. However, my experience seems to be an outlier at our present moment.

In 2015, a poll found that for every person who decides to convert to the Catholic faith, six others leave the Church.¹ In the last 25 years, the percentage of people who say religion is "very important" to them has cratered, from roughly 61 percent in 1998 to nearly 39 percent in 2023.² We need God now more than ever; we need His truth now more than ever. Yet, people decline to answer the call and opt instead for agnosticism or atheism.

In my senior year of high school I would describe myself as a well-meaning, creative, but impulsive young man. While these traits helped my academic performance and fostered a love of creative writing, I became an odd duck on campus. As a result, I would often throw myself into schoolwork or into my

extracurricular writing during lunch breaks, occasionally drifting from friend group to friend group.

The only dedicated group of friends I had stemmed from our creative writing club at the school. Each week, one to three students would submit a work of creative writing to be critiqued by each member of the club. After submitting my first piece, I became hooked on the process of writing, receiving feedback, and editing until a short story was ready for publishing.

By the time college application season rolled around, I resolutely applied to very selective colleges in the sole expectation that I would become a successful novelist. After my first volley of applications failed, I expanded my application criteria to include selective, but attainable, colleges, just as my school encouraged us. Sure enough, a few of the schools I applied to accepted me, some too late.

A Spanish Pilgrimage

By April, my mother and I toured a gorgeous college. In stark contrast to the austere, brown drabness of home, the campus had a beautiful arboretum under azure skies, a condition I would learn is hit or miss. Modern dorms and architecture blended with old buildings that had hosted many thousands of students before me.

During that encounter with the campus, God enraptured me with the beauty and the ethos of the college. As a Jesuit-formed “man for others,” I found the altruism and forward-thinking presented on campus calling to me. Finally, the friendliness of admissions officers on campus, the hospitality of my student host, and the camaraderie with other admitted students led me to accept the offer of admission.

Any hesitation that I might have felt fell to the wayside of my mind. Recent controversies did not bother me because I believed I agreed with the people on campus. In line with half of my high school class, I

went out of state to the best college that initially accepted me. One very selective liberal arts college called to admit me from their waitlist and I impulsively shot them down without any consultation from my parents.

The summer after high school graduation represented the initial high point of my faith. Although I had graduated, I went on a three-week pilgrimage offered by my high school along the Camino Ignacio trail through northeastern Spain. That trip included many trials and tribulations, many due to my own decisions.

The first day of our hiking, I thought I had heeded the advice given to us: do not carry more than ten percent of your body weight in your backpack. I carried exactly ten percent of my body weight, which amounted to an 18-pound pack on my back. The soccer players on the trip lapped me and outlasted me as I rested on the side of the trail. By day two, I had twin blisters on my pinky toes after absent-mindedly walking through a stream.

Notwithstanding these hurdles, I experienced a spiritual high when visiting St. Francis Xavier’s castle. As our group toured the immense structure, our guide showed us the crucifix St. Francis prayed before each day. This cross featured a Christ with an almost dopey smile on his face. Despite His suffering, that statue of Christ seemed to whisper, “Do not worry about your life or your suffering; I’ve got you. Now go forth and set the world on fire.” I did not know when gazing upon it how much that smile would comfort me within the next few years.

Men’s Struggles in College

Before attending college, I did not realize the uphill battle faced by men on campus. In 2018, 66.7% of male high school graduates enrolled in college, compared to 71.3% of women. During the Covid-19 pandemic, the 70 percent decline in enrollment during the 2020-21 academic year—a decline of 1.5 million students compared to five years earlier—could be accounted for by male

students.³ Some colleges even attempt to compensate for the widening disparity by extending offers to a higher percentage of male applicants.⁴ The college I attended that first semester had a gender ratio of 55 percent female to 45 percent male.

Declining male enrollment during the 2020-21 academic year may have had many causes, such as tight finances at home. However, the conventional view on college campuses that white heterosexual men are privileged, according to growing Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) offices that exist at most colleges in the U.S., likely has a larger role in causing men to stay home. At Georgia Tech, there were 3.2 times as many DEI staff persons as history professors. At the University of Louisville, the ratio is 2.9 to 1.⁵

College fell short of all my expectations. When I went to the Newman Center on campus, the group was tiny compared to the friend group I made online before attending. Being far away from my family meant that my youthful impulses were unrestrained, ultimately leading to isolation that felt like a desert—partly due to my own decisions and partly due to the characteristics of my age cohort.

While I thought of myself as liberal and compassionate, and on first impression I matched these sentiments, my compassion did not go far enough. While I thought of myself as a good person, my notions of liberalism were too conventional for a campus that cared more about adherence to far-left ideologies. As this discrepancy became apparent, my faith became less about being a man for others and morphed into opposition to the views on campus. My faith became a political idol, which led me to drift.

Loneliness and Vices

In sum, I did not fit in, and I found myself unhappy. I ate meals alone and ensconced myself in my room, fully embracing vices I had been cultivating rather than virtues within Christ. Every step that I took to mitigate my isolation only drove me further into it. Vice continued to pull me deeper into its quicksand. Yet, even in the face of isolation,

the embers of my faith, my family who continued to call consistently, and the few friends I had kept me from throwing away the greatest gift that God gives all of us.

I struggled for any foothold—that is, until the Covid pandemic struck the world and forced all students to return home. My isolation decreased as I spent more time with my family. Campus life died on the vine as the frequent passing in hallways, weekend parties and anything social were put on hold. Then, while on a break during a class Zoom call, my face tightened, and my body began to seize. I pitched forward in my chair and hit my head on my desk.

Medical Crisis as a Turning Point

My classmates reached out to my twin sister, who was at home with me after being sent home from her college. My sister came into my room to check on me and immediately called 911, brushing off my slurred attempts to tell her I was fine. An MRI made our hearts sink: a brain tumor, roughly the size of a marble. A surgeon recommended an operation as soon as possible. The surgery was scheduled for seven days following my diagnosis.

Those seven days went by quickly. My faith caught me in those days. As a surprise, close friends and family members showed up in my driveway with encouraging posters, while standing six feet away, and offering comfort, although their words were muffled by their masks. The night before the surgery, my mind went into overdrive as it looked over the edge to the possible outcomes.

On the one hand, I could wake up with a slight headache. On the other hand, I might never wake up. I would never say good morning to my family, never have the chance to say goodbye to my sister, never have the chance to graduate from college, and never have the chance to live a life according to His glory. As I tried to write under the assumption of this dour outcome, I wept. Through those tears, I felt the comforting hand of Jesus beginning to wipe them

away. "Have faith" were the only words that came to mind, His smile radiating over me. My digital scribbling never made it into print.

On Cinco de Mayo of 2020, my father drove me to the hospital for the procedure. We did not say much as we listened to Dave Matthews Band Radio on the way to the hospital. The morning blurred in anticipation of going under the knife. Yet, the peace of Christ, in addition to weak frontal lobe processing, filled me with the certainty that this was going to be an uncomplicated procedure.

That faith panned out. By the grace of God, the surgeon deftly fully resected the cancerous tumor. I thank Him every day for the success of the operation. The lab report came back benign and the tumor has not grown back. God had abundant patience as I slowly came back to faith over the course of my recovery.

A Relationship with God

After my near-death experiences, I see the value of a personal faith driven by a relationship with God; He gave me a particularly difficult path so I could see His will better as an adult. The challenge, as I see it, is that most of my generation has not had similar trials of faith and conversion. While I try to share my story of conversion when I can, most find it unrelatable.

But I do not allow myself to fall into despair. I see people my age at Mass and sing with joy, working every day to align the words sung from my lips with those in my heart. God's design is beginning to take

shape, and it is on all of us, regardless of age, to be diligent and smiling soldiers for Christ.

¹ Pew Research, "America's Changing Religious Landscape," May 12, 2015, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2015/05/12/chapter-2-religious-switching-and-intermarriage/>.

² Aaron Zitner, "America Pulls Back From Values That Once Defined It, WSJ-NORC Poll Finds," *Wall Street Journal*, March 27, 2023, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/americans-pull-back-from-values-that-once-defined-u-s-wsj-norc-poll-finds-df8534cd>.

³ Derek Thompson, "Colleges Have a Guy Problem," *The Atlantic*, September 14, 2021, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2021/09/young-men-college-decline-gender-gap-higher-education/620066/>.

⁴ Douglas Belkin, "A Generation of American Men Give Up on College: 'I Just Feel Lost,'" *Wall Street Journal*, September 6, 2021, https://www.wsj.com/articles/college-university-fall-higher-education-men-women-enrollment-admissions-back-to-school-11630948233?st=r5jiboojtgreuap&reflink=share_mobilewebshare.

⁵ Jay Greene and James Paul, "Diversity University: DEI Bloat in the Academy," Heritage Foundation, July 27, 2021, <https://www.heritage.org/education/report/diversity-university-dei-bloat-the-academy>.

The Most Important Person on Earth is a Mother



The Most important person on earth is a mother. She cannot claim the honor of having built Notre Dame Cathedral. She need not. She has built something more magnificent than any cathedral—a dwelling for an immortal soul, the tiny perfection of her baby's body. . . . The angels have not been blessed with such a grace. They cannot share in God's creative miracle to bring new saints to Heaven. Only a human mother can. Mothers are closer to God the Creator than any other creature; God joins forces with mothers in performing this act of creation. . .

What on God's good earth is more glorious than this: To be a mother?

— *Venerable Joseph Cardinal Mindszenty*

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