



A message to the faithful of the archdiocese from Archbishop Michael Jackels

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Summary reflection 9: my personal story of faith

The following is a summary reflection of the ninth talk given by Father Raniero Cantalamessa to the US bishops during their 2019 retreat:

We begin by being with Jesus, being taught by him, and following his lead, such as proclaiming the Gospel.

One way to do that is by sharing your personal story of faith, which Father Cantalamessa did in this talk. Here is a version of mine:

I was baptized as an infant, and raised in a Catholic family. I did all the things a Catholic family does together, until I got my driver's license and a part-time job.

That's when I stopped going to Sunday Mass, at least when circumstances were such that I didn't have go with my parents.

It wasn't that I rejected Jesus or his Catholic Church; I didn't know enough to make a decision like that. I had received the sacraments, but I wasn't well-catechized, and certainly not evangelized.

My life was not guided by Jesus, but by the basest of principles: avoid pain, enjoy pleasure. I was going nowhere, except for hell, if I didn't change my wild-child ways.

Then God whipped up a perfect storm, one that leaves everything changed in its wake.

During my freshman year at UNL, I was regularly chanting in a Buddhist temple. What started out of curiosity, continued out of a desire to experience something holy, other.

When the temple leader invited me to declare myself a Buddhist, I was faced with the question: Am I a Buddhist, or a Catholic? That was the first part of God's perfect storm.

God used a co-worker at my summer job as the second part of the storm: a ministry student, who watched me break almost every Commandment, and who out of concern for my soul gave me a Gospel book, inviting me to read it, which I did, surprisingly.

Equally surprising was the third part of the storm: I spent the last month of summer praying and doing mission work with a group of guys my age who were conscious Catholics, trying to discern a vocation to priesthood.

Their personal relationship with Jesus, their practice of faith in prayer and Holy Mass, their desire to do God's will was new to me, and attractive; I wanted what they had.

When I returned to UNL in the fall, the storm subsided, leaving me somewhat changed: calling myself a Catholic, reading the Gospel, practicing prayer, Mass, and Confession.

The last part of the storm changed me the rest of the way. During my sophomore year I told my Pastor, who was the Vocation Director, that I felt called to the seminary. He responded, and I quote: "I wouldn't take you if you were the last man on earth!"

The reason he gave was that I consistently refused to serve others when asked. What kind of Catholic is that, he asked, and what kind of priest, who didn't come to serve?

Well, I threw myself into service, and entered the seminary the next year. And the rest is history, my story.

What is your story? There has to be a story about your decision to follow Jesus: not your parents, or local community, or Catholic culture, but you.

Maybe when you were a youth, or a young adult, or it happened after the birth of a child, or maybe that moment is still to come.

If your personal decision is still to come, the same means that contributed to my conversion are available to all, with the potential for the same results:

- Association with happy, healthy intentional followers of Jesus in his Catholic Church;
- Daily personal prayer;
- Sunday worship at Holy Mass;
- Monthly Confession of sin to a priest;
- Frequent reading of the Gospel;
- Ready service in your parish and of the poor.

Those same means can nourish our personal decision. If our relationship with Jesus is not constantly renewed, then worship will eventually be reduced to performing rituals, prayer to reciting words someone else wrote, and religion to keeping rules, but with our mind and heart far from Jesus, with someone/something else directing our life.

If that were to happen, woe would be to us (and to others who suffer because of us). Instead, may others be blessed when we proclaim the Gospel by sharing our personal glory of faith.

Michael Jackels

Archbishop of Dubuque

