

From Catholicism to Christ:

Testimony of Clare McNamara

In recent months, a long-standing friend of ours, **Clare McNamara**, shared her testimony publicly and she kindly forwarded to me the text of what she said. With **'Clare's'** permission I am now reproducing what she said in this article and our joint prayer is that the Lord might be pleased to use it for the salvation of others still deceived as **Clare** was before her conversion

Testimony of Clare McNamara

I was born in Liverpool to Roman Catholic parents in 1958 and was an only child. My dad's sister lived opposite, she was also RC, and quite religious, and I sometimes stayed over with her.

I was christened, and then went on to a RC school, where at age seven I made my first holy communion, confession, and later confirmation. We never ate meat on Friday's, especially Good Friday, nor on "Ash Wednesday," when we received ashes (of burned palm leaves) on our foreheads. All good Catholics did these things to gain merit, I wanted to be a "good catholic."

I got 3 sets of rosary beads for my communion, and a prayer book depicting pictures of the mass. We went to mass each Sunday, even though I was bored and didn't understand anything that went on. If you missed Sunday mass it was said to be a "mortal sin" and you would go to hell, so it was in fear that I went.

I don't remember praying much as a child, or even in Catholic secondary school, where I was taught in some subjects by nuns, sometimes they would ask what the sermon was the previous Sunday, to check if we'd been to mass, lots didn't go. I only prayed repetitious prayers from the mass book, or after confession. I was totally programmed into the Catholic teachings, as were my parents and auntie.

My mum occasionally prayed to St Anthony if she'd lost anything, she used to work in a Catholic retreat convent as a cleaner, and they would let me go with her. I remember I was fascinated by a large illustrated children's bible that they had displayed in their library, I used to spend ages looking through it.

As I got older, I led a more liberal lifestyle, liked to drink, and went out with friends to nightclubs, though I was always glad to get home again. I still had no clue I was a sinner, and tried to still get to confession when I could, to confess my sins to a priest, and then I would be "forgiven," say my penance of 3 Hail Mary's, or 3 "Our Father's", and go out and carry on in the same way.

I never questioned the Catholic Church, never wondered about what would happen when I died, although the idea of the fires of purgatory, terrified me! In my mind it was somewhere grey, dismal and awful. I never had a bible, and never heard the Good News explained, I was heading for a Christless eternity, and was totally blinded.

I then met Mike who was also a Catholic, we got married, and had 2 sons by the time I was 21. Everything was fine I thought, we were still going to mass each week, and also on "holy days of obligation," so "ticking all the boxes." I would feel guilty if I didn't go.

We went to quite a few churches in the area for mass, and we could even go on a Saturday evening, so we could keep Sundays free. It didn't matter where we went, as it was the same in every church, some masses were shorter, which suited us, and there was no explanation of the gospel.

I would pray to statues and light candles, I just kept going and ticking the box. Our two sons also attended mass with us each week, then as they got older they stopped.

We then became involved in the Catholic Charismatic movement, firstly through going to their "healing services" that Mike's mum told us about, and then we started to go on "pilgrimages." We went to Israel, with a Catholic group, to Lourdes in France, Knock in Ireland twice, to Walsingham, to Rome and 3 times to a place in Bosnia called Medjugorje, where allegedly the "Madonna" (or Mary), was "appearing" to some young people. The masses were packed at the local church, and there were many souvenir shops, and we could listen to the so-called visionaries talking about their experiences.

I thought that visiting holy places was an extra dimension to my religion, and that I was being very spiritual. Every November, we would also hand in a list of dead relatives, to the priest, so that masses could be said for them, that they would get out of purgatory sooner, so not only praying to the dead, but for the dead. I questioned nothing.

I also dabbled in New Age things. I was still searching but didn't know what for. I got into Buddhism, contemplative prayer, and meditations, all taught by a RC priest who I knew. I also got involved in something called Cursillo, which was a short catholic course over 3 days, Spanish in origin, and held twice a year. People used to come and stay in the old priests' seminary, and talks would be given, rosaries and masses said, it was all quite intense, and worked on emotions. I went for quite a few years helping.

I got into Jesuit spirituality, and went on short retreats where we did guided meditations and visualisations. I joined a "healing team" with a group of Catholics from the Cursillo, and gradually they, and I, became involved with the Catholic Charismatic Renewal movement.

At the time (around autumn 2000), I thought that the next step in my walk was to become involved in "healing ministry". I read a book on healing written by a C of E vicar in Liverpool. I looked into it, and found some names, phoned them, and eventually the calls I made led to a vicar and a church that was local to us, in fact he was the minister of the evangelical Anglican church round the corner, so I thought this must be "a sign," and I wrote to the vicar asking about healing services etc.

A lady from the church phoned and visited me a few weeks later in December, but she spoke about what was happening at the church, the groups etc, and that they run an Alpha course, which I hadn't heard of, so she left it all with me, but never mentioned about healing services. I felt a bit confused and wondered what the next step would be.

Then in early 2001 I went to a Catholic conference also charismatic, and connected with Cursillo. It was in Oxford, and one of the speakers there asked us (when we were in small groups), to note down what life was like before committing your life to Jesus, and what it was like now, after. I don't know what led him to ask the question, but God was working all things for His purposes.

I became quite agitated and felt concerned, and realised, by God's grace, that I didn't know Jesus as my Lord and Saviour, and didn't trust in Him, and hadn't committed my life to Him, I knew OF Him, but didn't really KNOW Him, and I felt sorrowful. Looking back, I believe this was when God started to draw me to Him, and work on my religious heart. I wasn't saved on that day, but it was the start of His mercy and saving grace. At the end of that day, when we were all together in the large room, we were asked if anyone wanted to share anything, something I always found difficulty doing.

It hadn't been obvious before to me that I hadn't committed my life to Jesus, but it was very obvious to me now. I could hardly get my words out, and my voice was trembling – I finally said – I now realise I haven't found Jesus yet. I didn't truly know what the other Catholics in that room believed either, but God was dealing with *me*.

Some of the prayers that I wrote down while I was there were – "be humble and repentant," "help me to surrender to You," "make Your home in Me" "help me to walk in a new way, with the Holy Spirit, in a new life," "I am sick of my sins," "repent and ask."

I got back from Oxford full of talk about Jesus, and wanted to know more, I felt I needed to start again, and learn about Jesus, and study the bible. I told Mike, but he thought I had gone mad! So, still clueless, I rang around a few of the RC churches in my area, asking if they did bible studies, (I was so naive, of course they didn't!)

So then I thought, maybe the Catholic RCIA course would help (the Rite of Christian Initiation as Adults), they would be bound to have some good teaching – wouldn't they?? The courses were for adult "non-Catholics" coming in to join the RC church, but I was sure they may let me on one, so I could learn more about Jesus – that's what I thought. Thankfully this didn't happen!

I knew my own parish church couldn't offer anything, the priest there had hardly spoken to us while we attended, he had never been particularly sociable. I had also become a "eucharistic minister" there, which meant I could take the communion wafer, (which I believed to be the actual body of Christ), out to other people who couldn't get out, and I could also give it out at mass.

Even though I wanted to know about Jesus, I was still looking at Buddhist meditations, and wondering where I would go next, maybe this Alpha would help I thought, so I contacted the local Anglican church again, and attended the Alpha over the next few weeks, they were all very friendly, and talked about Jesus, there was so much going on there, there seemed to be a buzz about it!

Another Catholic priest at a church where I had been attending some weekday prayer services, told me I needed to cool off going to the Anglican church, and keep going to mass, he said there is a word called apostasy that could apply if I carried on – I had to look it up when I got home, as I didn't understand what it meant.

I was still being pulled in different ways, unsettled, not knowing which path to take and no one to ask, I kept writing in my journal about wanting to know God more, and then going to speak to Catholics about it! I was juggling the Alpha and the Anglican church, with the Catholic Church, and the Charismatic movement, I didn't know which direction to take.

In February 2001 I prayed to Jesus, I wrote in my journal that I was "thirsting for God", I prayed that I would soon know Jesus, and wrote "Is wanting You meant to feel so painful, I know something is happening, I want to repent and know the scriptures, please help me Lord".

Second week of the Alpha talked about the cross, they said we are all sinners and need to repent. Gradually I began to read the bible a bit more and I really wanted to understand it, they seemed to encourage reading the bible. I felt I was moving forward somehow, and my behaviour seemed to change, maybe I was beginning my life in Christ. I was still taking everything at face value though, and going on feelings rather than what was true and what wasn't. I was still mixed up, although I knew that things had changed within me, and I had started to see things in a new way.

The Alpha course fitted around the other experiences I had had in the charismatic movement, there were prophetic phrases used, and "words from the Lord," etc.

After Alpha, I began to attend their church regularly on Sundays, still going to mass on Saturday night, so had a foot in "both camps" so to speak! I also joined a house group later on. At church they talked about prayer walks, and being intercessors, they used "sacred spaces," and prayer stations, One of the evening services had bean bags and showed video clips once a month, and I became very much involved in a lot of things. The music was similar to the charismatic movement, it all felt good, and they had bibles in the seats – I could look at the scriptures properly now I thought.

I got involved in a one-to-one bible study with an older woman from the church, who also used to get "words from the Lord." All this wasn't biblical, and she had her own interpretation of the bible, but I believed all she said, and loved that she seemed to have an answer for everything, and that she would discuss the scriptures, so I kept asking her questions, and we went to events together. I had joined this church, and really hadn't checked what they taught, or their biblical stance on anything, I was still very spiritually naive.

Also through this lady, we started watching "God TV," and Mike and I got involved with the Word of Faith movement, and TV preachers and so-called TV evangelists, again we didn't know how to check what we saw and heard against the Word, as we had no one we could ask who knew about these things. We went to crusades and conferences when these preachers came over. Eventually later, we found out they were false teachers.

I became involved more with a group of Catholic Charismatics called "Prince of Peace," in Ormskirk, which Mike also joined, their weekly Monday meetings used to last until midnight. They also organised huge conventions in the summer in Walsingham, with Catholics from all over the country and abroad. It was called "New Dawn," and it was held in in big marquees, I had started going there in 2001, and Mike in 2002.

They often gave "prophecies" "words of knowledge," prayed strangely, and people were falling to the floor, it was quite disturbing looking back, and although at the time, I thought it was of God, it wasn't, it was totally unbiblical, although I didn't know this at the time. They still do this today.

Other Catholics told me that it was OK to go to an Anglican church, as long as I didn't go to communion there, as I would then be "in communion" with the Anglican church, and I couldn't do that as a Catholic. I was really in turmoil with it all, and didn't understand what was going on, why were there so many things going round in my head.

I was talking to so many people, who were on different wavelengths, all telling me different things and challenging me, it was one of the most confusing times in my life.

I also went again to the shrine in Medjugorje, talked to more Catholics there, and got even more confused. I continued to go to Prince of Peace and New Dawn, I was still involved with some Catholic organisations, I was still going to mass on Saturday, and the Anglican service on Sunday, but now going to mass less frequently.

Eventually in mid-2002 I told my parish priest that I was going to the local Anglican church, and so I could no longer be a eucharistic minister, he didn't seem that bothered really, he was quite pleasant, said it was good, and wished me all the best!

I continued to go to the Anglican church, got more involved, but still didn't realise it wasn't sound, it was centred on experiences and feelings, and as I had these within the charismatic movement, it seemed to fit in with what I was looking for at the time, their teaching was quite shallow, although I didn't recognise that, as I had nothing to measure against.

I still dipped in and out of Catholic things at the same time, thinking I could maybe tell the catholic charismatic community and Cursillo that I loved, about how Jesus was working in my life, even though I was going to an Anglican church, but they didn't want to know, and couldn't understand where I was coming from.

They didn't want me involved now, and eventually in 2003 I realised I had to leave it behind, though I continued to go to New Dawn again the following year. I was also coming to the huge realisation (for me), that Jesus wasn't actually in a wafer, which was the main focus of the mass and the Catholic Church.

I had gradually come to pray differently, as I had a relationship with Jesus, and would talk to Him daily, in thanks, praise and petition.

The people at my new church seemed to believe so many different things, the meetings gave me warm fuzzy feelings, but I didn't really understand that these may not necessarily be the best reason to go. I still thought it was the right place for me, because it felt good and they had bibles.

I really thought I was settled there, I worked in the office later on, I loved the church, it was literally round the corner, there was lots going on, and the people there were all kind and friendly, and I saw some of them during the week. There was no way (I thought at the time), that I would ever want to leave, I was happy. I was also doing some counselling there, as I was qualified in this field.

Looking back this church moved me on, and helped me get to the next stage, but it wasn't sound and solid in God's word, I hadn't realised how important it was to check what a church actually taught.

In late 2006 I discovered on the internet, a so called "prophetic prayer deliverance ministry", run by an American lady in Wales, who was also charismatic. The vicar gave me the OK to go and I thought it would be of benefit. She told me I needed to get baptised by full immersion before I could see her. I was a bit shocked, as I didn't understand why - I thought I had already been "baptised" as a baby, and didn't know anything about full immersion. But, the more I looked at it, the more I seemed to be drawn to it, I really wanted to get baptised.

The C of E church I was now attending didn't do full immersion for anyone who had been "baptised" as a baby, only for those who had come to faith there, and had never been christened or baptised before. I didn't understand why they wouldn't, but carried on seeing if there could be a way.

I wanted to find out more about being baptised, and read that water baptism signified the new life after we are born again - that was me I thought - and it was a public declaration of following Jesus, and an act of obedience, and also scriptural, so this was what I wanted to do. I don't think the vicar was too pleased when I asked him, but they wouldn't baptise me, so I had to try and find another way. I spoke with Mike about baptism, and strangely he agreed with what it meant, and wanted to do the same, so we went to Israel to do this in June 2007, this time not with the Catholics.

In late 2007/early 2008 I had some concerns about what the church was doing, and started to question the vicar. I emailed him and asked questions about some of the books he was promoting. They had also started to use the "Message" bible, I hadn't really taken much notice before, but did now. He said I was being over cautious, and there was nothing to worry about. The church was worldly, which I hadn't noticed before, and they wanted to be what they called "a lake and river church," they talked about doing church differently, and "Fresh Expressions."

I felt uneasy about it all, and kept finding issues there. The friendship with the woman at church whom I'd done the bible study with was also ended very abruptly, neither of us discussed anything, but we/she suddenly stopped contact. God was again at work.

I then discovered a TV programme called "Does Truth Matter Anymore?" where John MacArthur was presenting a series called "The Downgrade Controversy" which Spurgeon had published in a monthly magazine, in the late 1800's, and where he denounced liberal theology and worldliness. In watching this, and hearing about false doctrines, I gradually started to see that the church I was attending had this liberal theology.

I had never heard of Spurgeon, or John MacArthur, and was really riveted by it – it was totally different to what I had come to know.

Meanwhile I had also made some sound contacts through the internet. I had searched and found biblically sound ministries and emailed them. Mike at that time, by God's grace, was now beginning to question the Catholic Church. One of the ministries I exchanged emails with was "Take Heed," an apologetics ministry, based in NI, which was founded by Cecil Andrews. This was in the first quarter of 2008.

I emailed Cecil many times and he patiently answered my questions with many scriptural references. I asked about Roman Catholicism, Emergent Church, The Charismatic movement, certain preachers and what they taught, signs and wonders, Word of Faith, different bible versions, and finding a biblically sound church. God was using Cecil for His purposes.

I had to be sure what I was doing was right, so also asked the other church ministers that I had been in contact with, the same questions, (*including Billy – **Clare's now pastor**), and married up the answers to see if they agreed. I had also found websites and ministries that were run by ex-Catholics, one of them being Richard Bennett, who was an ex Catholic priest.

Even though I had left the Catholic Church, there were still many things I couldn't yet explain biblically to Mike. So while Cecil was helping me, he was also helping Mike, gently pointing me in the right direction. Mike wouldn't read articles or books, but he would watch a DVD, so Cecil sent a couple about the errors of the Catholic church and we watched them together, we were both wondering where to go with it all, as there was so much to take in. I hadn't yet told Mike what I had found out about the Charismatic Church, and the preachers we had followed!

I wanted to take Mike over to NI to see Cecil, he could explain more, and I suggested we could stay somewhere over there near him and meet up. Instead, Cecil kindly suggested that we could stay with him and his wife Margaret, even though we'd never met. We travelled to see them in June 2008, and stayed for 3 days! Our heads were virtually exploding when we got back with all the new realisations!

I realised the church I was now at wasn't right, and I later told them I was leaving, they were shocked, and it was quite awkward. I then started a "church search" with Cecil helping. One of the churches recommended was Aughton Park, Chris Hand and another man from Crich Baptist Church had recommended it, and Cecil was the third person to endorse it. Mike left his church a couple of months later. At last we were both in a biblically sound church and as Cecil had told us – we needed to "sit regularly under the word," a phrase I had never really come across before!

As I did that, and heard the whole gospel preached regularly, I grew in my faith. I believe I had already trusted in Jesus as my Saviour, and it was confirmed to me from hearing the word soundly preached at Aughton, that I was a sinner, that Christ had taken the penalty for my sins, and that I was saved by grace, not through works or merit, or by praying to "saints" or Mary.

When I look back I can see God's hand at work. Everything that happened, He had allowed for a purpose, in order for us to grow and understand. Yes, this is my testimony, but it is connected with Mike's, as we reached the same outcome together. I lost many friendships on the way, but am privileged to be able to pray for those I once knew, and have lost touch with, including 4 priests, that we pray will turn away from the Catholic church.

"I once was lost but now am found, was blind but now I see!" I have only been able to travel each step along the way by God's unmerited free limitless grace – I am still amazed that He set me free from all these obstacles, and false teachings, but it is only through God's kindness and compassion, and saving grace, that I am now free from it all! I am still a work in progress, and have much to learn!

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Cecil Andrews – 'Take Heed' Ministries – 9th September 2023