

# THE JOY OF KEEPING THE FAITH

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Thriving in the Church  
after RCIA

CHRISTINE WAY SKINNER

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# INTRODUCTION

## Keep the Faith

**K**eept the faith! When I was a child, we had a parish priest; Father Walter Healey was his name. “Keep the Faith” was his motto. This saying appeared regularly in the bulletin, in cards he wrote to people and, at the end of his days, on the cover of the program for his funeral Mass. Father Healey’s use of this phrase affected me so much that I still remember him doing it forty years after the fact. If truth be told, I always found it a bit odd. It seemed like basic common sense to me – like “be safe” or “drive carefully!” Why would anyone even consider the alternative of *not* being safe, *not* driving carefully or *not* keeping the faith? To do otherwise is to risk one’s life. It didn’t make sense to me. But I still rather liked that he always used the phrase.

Now, these forty years later, I have a different perspective. As my dad was fond of saying, “Common sense isn’t really all that common.” People do not always make safe choices, drive carefully or, even, keep the faith. We continue to remind one another to do the things we need to do to live our lives. In our loving care for one another, we continue to call each other to common sense. So, it is a perfect phrase to offer you, a new Catholic. Whether you have just been baptized or have joined the Catholic Church from a different tradition, it is now up to you to “keep the faith” that has been entrusted to you as a gift and that you have chosen to

accept. In so doing, you will guard your spiritual life just as by driving carefully you will guard your physical life.

I didn't know it at the time, but "keep the faith" wasn't Father's phrase. It came from St. Paul. In his letter to Timothy, Paul reflected on his life and told Timothy he believed that he had been a faithful servant of God. He wrote, "I have fought the good fight, I have kept the faith." (2 Timothy 4:7) As a new Catholic, you are likely full of hope that you, like St. Paul, will continue to fight the good fight and keep the faith. And we, companions in this Church you have joined, hope and pray the same for you. As part of our commitment to support you, we offer you this series of reflections and advice.

This book is not intended for directors of initiation, pastors or catechists, though they might find it helpful. It is written for you, the neophyte, now beginning the practice of your faith in this Church founded by Christ Jesus. You have been through a lengthy process of discernment, preparation and initiation. You have had guides and teachers and other candidates and catechumens with whom you have met regularly. But you no longer have the regular companionship of an initiation team and other candidates and catechumens. It is time to launch. The advice in this book is intended to help you navigate the next phase of your faith journey.

## **Faith that Fizzles – Faith that Flourishes**

As a director of Christian initiation for most of my professional life, I have seen many people enter the Church. These people have come with a wide range of **knowledge** of the Church. Some are very familiar with the faith. One woman I worked with had been attending Mass with her husband

since they had met more than thirty years before our meeting. She had raised a Catholic family, participated in most parish events and knew Church teaching better than some cradle Catholics. Everyone assumed she was Catholic. On her twenty-fifth wedding anniversary, she came to my office and told me she had decided that it made sense to join the Church to which she, functionally at least, already belonged.

Other people, however, arrive on the doorstep of the church with no knowledge of even the basic Christian beliefs. They have been raised in a non-religious family in a non-Christian culture. But they are looking for something to make sense of their lives, and what they have seen of the Catholic Church appeals to them.

People also come with a wide range of **commitment**. For some, the inquiry process has been going on informally for years, and their search for the Living God has been intense and intentional. Others come wanting their children to be placed in the Catholic school system and, admittedly, are not interested in practising the faith in any committed fashion.

Those who enter the process of initiation in the Roman Catholic Church also come from all conceivable **demographics** of gender, race, culture, age, and economic and professional backgrounds. In my own ministry, I have worked with people as young as seven (the lower limit for this process) to as old as eighty-eight. The latter was a wonderful quiet and wise Jamaican woman named Etta, who brought Jamaican rum punch to our gathering when it was her turn for treats and who recently passed away at the age of 105 and a half years. I have seen lawyers, business people, social workers, teachers, plumbers, musicians, people who are unemployed and even a woman who practised prostitution choose to join this Church of more than a billion members.

What this diverse group of people had in common is that they had faith at least the size of a mustard seed and wanted to find support for living that faith in and from the Catholic community.

The faith of most people who have been through the process of initiation has flourished. Some have become pillars of parish life, taking on important roles of service in the community. When I look out on any given Sunday, I see lecturers, choir members, ministers of hospitality and members of the finance council who once sat in my office wondering if God might be calling them to become Catholic. However, for some, sadly, their faith has fizzled. For one reason or another, they have left the Church and never returned. I have remained in contact with many of these people (those who have stayed and those who have not). I have listened to their insights about faith as time has passed. I have also made some observations of my own. This book is a sharing of those insights about what has helped people to “keep the faith.” Some of these insights come directly from people who, like you, have been through the initiation process. These are found in boxed quotes throughout the book.

Wherever *you* have come from or whatever has brought *you* here, we hope that your faith will flourish and that you will find the place in the Christian community that God has carved out for you. You, the Church and the world will be richer if this happens.

## **The Parable of the Sower**

The success or failure of the Gospel message taking root in us is not a new problem. Indeed, Jesus saw that when

he preached, his words were received in a variety of ways. Sometimes, the Word took hold and flourished. In other instances, it did not. Jesus saw a parallel between the growth of seeds and the growth of faith. In his typical fashion, he told his disciples a parable to explain this growth. He spoke about a sower who sowed seed on the ground. Some of the seed fell on the path but was trampled on or eaten by birds. Some fell on rocky ground and dried up. Some seed fell among weeds which choked it. But some of the seed fell on good soil and became fruitful.

As commonly as Jesus told parables, the disciples did not understand them. So, Jesus went on to explain that the seed was like God's Word. Some people receive the Word but, like a seed that is not planted in good soil, it is vulnerable. The seed is "stolen" by those who speak words that are easier to hear or less challenging to live but are not ultimately life-giving. These are words spoken by lesser powers, by devils, as it were. Sometimes the seed takes root quickly but superficially. The first signs of growth bring great joy, but because those signs are superficial, they cannot bear the test of time or the challenge of the elements. Sometimes the seed is overwhelmed by weeds. (As a gardener, I most relate to this part of the parable.) The "cares and riches and pleasures of life" take over, and the seed cannot compete and dies. Jesus encourages us, however, to hear the Word and to "hold it fast in an honest and good heart." If we do so, with patient endurance, we will be like good soil and that Word will bear fruit.

You can find this parable in the Gospel of Luke (8:4-18). I encourage you to read it and to reflect on it regularly in your prayer as you work to ensure that your new-found

faith develops strong roots and continues to deepen and grow so it can withstand the challenges that you, like every Christian, will inevitably face.

The question now is, how do we ensure that the Word you have heard finds fertile soil so that it takes root and provides bountiful fruit?

## **The Non-Negotiables**

Seeds have some absolute needs: sunlight, water, fertilizer. These are non-negotiables. Without them, the seed doesn't have a chance. Faith is similar. If faith is going to flourish, some practices are non-negotiable. Without these practices firmly in place, our faith will not have the strength to withstand the first challenge. We will be like those people who receive the Word with joy but because it takes no root, it cannot be sustained. Here are the non-negotiables of faith:

1. Place God at the centre of your life.
2. Develop a practice of personal prayer.
3. Live liturgically.
4. Participate in the life of the Church community.
5. Put faith into practice.
6. Find ways to support ongoing learning and spiritual growth.

Within these non-negotiables, the Catholic Church offers a wide variety of ways in which you can find just the right way of practising your faith to fit your personality, culture and individual circumstance. Let us now look at these important aspects of strong and mature faith in more depth.





# BUILDING A HOUSE ON SOLID ROCK – PLACING GOD AT THE CENTRE

In the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, Jesus reminds us that a strong faith needs a strong foundation. (Matthew 7:24; Luke 6:48) Living faithfully is comparable to building a house. If we build our house on sand, at some point it will collapse and wash into the sea. If we want our house to last, it must be built on a solid foundation – a rock-solid foundation. Only rock will hold up our house against the elements. The Rock on which we need to build our Christian life is God. God alone will hold us up. God alone will not disappoint.

Whatever drew you to the Church in the first place – Grandma’s constant rosaries, Father Friendly’s warm welcome, Sister Scholastica’s intellectual challenge, a longing for community, the search for a sense of purpose, an attraction to the beauty of worship, the desire to be of the same faith as your spouse and children – only God will keep you here.

The most common reason I see for the fizzling of the practice of faith is that the person’s faith was not really, fully

and deeply in God, experienced through his Son Jesus Christ and strengthened by the Holy Spirit. Instead, the Church was chosen because of individual relationships with people, a sense of community or some other noble but ultimately fallible thing. When these things failed the believer in a substantial way, membership in the Church was abandoned. This is true for cradle Catholics as well as those who are newly initiated.

### **Have Faith in God but Be Patient with the Rest of Us**

While it is important to have faith and trust in those we love, the Church and our religious leaders, it is God alone who is worthy of worship. Our spouses, our children, our friends and even the Church reflect God's goodness, love and care for us... but they reflect it imperfectly.

Marriages break down. If your reason for joining the Church was unity with your spouse, and your reason for staying remained this, then often a marriage failure means the end of the practice of faith. Our spouses, no matter how much we love them, will fail us, and we will fail them. God alone remains faithful, loving and perfect. God alone will not fail us.

Communities and their leaders eventually show their dysfunctions and sinful ways of relating. Your parish priest, the director of your RCIA formation, the nun who runs the community meal, the president of the Catholic Women's League, the recruiter for the Knights of Columbus, the principal of the Catholic school to which you were so excited to send your children, and the wonderful friends you

have made during your preparation – all these will also, in small and sometimes large ways, display pettiness, greed, dishonesty, unkindness or any other number of sinful characteristics.

This will happen in a community despite our best intentions. I'll give you a personal example. As background, you need to know that I pride myself on my peacemaking skills. When I was a young girl, I was the one on the playground trying to reconcile warring factions. This continued throughout high school and university and well into my professional life. I generally have an ability to see the good in mostly everyone, so I'm not often the one "at war." That is the context.

Here is the story. A few years ago, a woman I had been preparing for initiation stopped coming to our meetings. I waited a few weeks and puzzled about what might have caused her to stop attending. I had witnessed a slight tension between her and another team member, so I figured he must have offended her. I called her after she missed the third session. I asked her if everything was okay.

"No," she replied curtly. Silence.

"Did someone offend you?" I queried.

"As a matter of fact, they did," she admitted. I *knew* it. That man!

"Was it Joe?" I offered, sure that I had figured out the problem. (Names, of course, have been changed to protect the innocent who, in this case, are truly innocent.)

"No, it wasn't Joe. Quite honestly," she said and, after a pause, continued, "it was... it was you."

Faith has to be inside yourself. If people are not very kind or the church is awful, at the end of the day, these are “people” things. Going to church is not about all of these things. It is about meeting God.

—Aylin öztürk Akşen

Then she explained what I had done that had deeply hurt her, including waiting two weeks before calling to see why she wasn't attending our gatherings. I was flabbergasted. I had not intended to hurt, but it was clear that I had... and deeply. I apologized sincerely, but the woman never did return. I am not sure what happened to her after this incident. I hope she found a place where she could practise her faith if she wasn't able to find it at our parish because of my insensitivity. But I don't know. It was a humbling but significant moment in my life. I learned that none of us can place our faith in a person. Sometimes not even in oneself.

We ought to hold our brothers and sisters in Christ, especially our religious leaders, to high standards of honesty, integrity and morality. However, they *will* fail us, and we *will* fail them. God alone remains faithful, loving and perfect. God alone will not fail us.

Finally, the Church itself will likely disappoint you at some point. Catholics believe the Holy Spirit provides divine guidance to the Church. Jesus promised that the Spirit would lead us and inspire us from the time of Christ's Ascension into heaven until his final return. However, guidance and inspiration do not mean that God forces us to be good. We often are not. One does not need to delve deeply into history books to see that this holy Church of Jesus Christ has been,

in serious ways, much less than holy. From the persecution of non-believers to the treatment of Indigenous peoples to the sexual abuse of children, people in the Church – sometimes even in the name of the Church – have perpetrated great evil and injustice. This cannot be denied if we are honest about who we are. We are a pilgrim Church. That is, we are on our way to becoming what Christ calls us to be. We are not there yet. So, expect that even the Church will fail us, and we will fail it. God alone remains faithful, loving and perfect. God alone will not fail us.

### **Idol Worship – Don't Settle for a Small God**

It is not enough, however, to place God at the centre of our faith. In making God the centre, we must also avoid idol worship. Yes, that's right – idol worship. This may seem an odd thing to warn someone about in the 21st century. The image that often comes to mind when we hear the term “idol worship” is that of the Israelites in the desert worshipping a golden calf. Such idolatry is not much of a temptation in modern times. However, there are contemporary forms of idolatry in which we worship as God something that is less than God – wealth, status, success and a myriad of other things. Sometimes, even the idea of God can also be the subject of idol-like devotion.

The God we place at the centre of our faith has to be God. The true God is more than we can ever conceive or imagine. The true God is, and will always remain, a mystery. Even if we were to devote every moment of our lives to searching for God, God would remain a mystery – a “knowable” mystery, but a mystery nonetheless. Our images of God

will (and ought to) expand and deepen over our lifetime. This is why in Scripture a great variety of images are used to describe God: mother, father, lover, rock, creator, friend, saviour, Lord. By some counts, Scripture contains nearly a thousand different images of God. Add images used by the saints through the ages, and there are even more.

The God who Christ proclaims to us is not simply a God who makes us feel good, but a God who challenges us to move out of our comfort zones. To use a popular phrase, God “comforts the afflicted and afflicts the comfortable.” God cannot be defined but constantly reveals Godself to us. God can give us strength to bear our burdens and can inspire us to accomplish feats of love and beauty beyond our wildest imagination.

### **A God Big Enough to Support Challenge**

At the centre of our faith and worship, we must place what I like to think of as a “big enough” God. We will know that the God in whom we believe is a big enough God because this God can withstand the challenges of questioning and doubt. We need not be afraid of questions that we can’t answer because when God is this great, “I don’t know” is a reasonable response. You can say, “I don’t know this, that or the other thing about the mystery of God, but that is okay, because I have had an encounter with God and experienced a Divine Presence that I know to be true. I have experienced something that empowers me. I have met someone I believe in. I don’t have all the answers, and quite frankly I never will, but still I believe.” This is faith.

Theologian Paul Tillich taught that the opposite of faith is not doubt. The opposite of faith is certainty. Faith in a God of mystery can withstand doubt. The Church even has a patron saint of doubters – his name is Thomas. He stood before the Risen Christ and declared, “Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.” (John 20:25) Jesus indulged Thomas, letting him place his hand in the wound in his side. Then he declared, “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.” Thomas was imperfect in faith, but still the Church celebrates him as a saint. So don’t be concerned that your concept of God is not crystal clear. In fact, be concerned if it is.

The Church teaches that each of us constantly experiences God’s presence and self-communication. We are not always aware of it, but it is always our reality. Sometimes when we share our experiences of God with one another, we can seem to come into conflict. One person’s experience of God may not only be different from ours, but may contradict it. Many times, this conversation comes up early in our catechetical sessions as we prepare people for initiation. I often use an African folk tale of which there are many versions. The short version is that there is a village of blind folks. Being blind, the villagers have hearing that is heightened. One day they hear a distant sound that they do not understand. A scout is sent to discover the source of the sound and determine if it is a threat. A few days later, the scout returns and says the sound is coming from an animal that is extremely large and soft which could smother the inhabitants of the village.

Aware of their blindness, the villagers send a second scout for confirmation. This scout returns with the message that the first scout was wrong. This animal bears two sword-like weapons which could impale villagers. More confused than ever, the villagers send out a third scout, who returns saying the beast was snake-like and could strangle them. It turned out that all the scouts met the same animal. It was an elephant. But because they were blind and because they encountered only a small part of the massive animal, their descriptions appeared to be contradictory. They were, in fact, not contradictory but partial – a belly, a tusk and a trunk. It is like this with our image of God. We all have partial, blind but true encounters.

God is ultimately a mystery. It is also true, however, that God is knowable. God is majestic, and yet also intimately and warmly present to us as a daddy. God is Father; God is Mother. These images are not contradictory. They are necessary to help us understand a God who is big enough to believe in.

So, if you find yourself in a discussion with someone who disputes your understanding of God, bear them with patience. You are both in the presence of God. You are simply encountering a different aspect of this mystery depending upon your honest but blind encounter with a Divinity too great to be summed up in one person's conception.

### **A God Big Enough to Bear Our Burdens**

As a child I spent a lot of time at my great-grandmother's house. A religious picture of some sort hung on every wall, in every room. Most of them were large, even imposing.



When you entered the house, it was clear that faith played a central role there. Today's real estate agents would insist on restaging this house immediately. Way too personal! Way too religious! Who would buy a house where the Sacred Heart of Jesus dominates in such a way?

The place that religious images had in my great-grandmother's house reflected the God she believed in. Grandma believed in a big God. A second-generation Irish immigrant, she was a farmer's wife in a difficult marriage at a time when people stayed in difficult marriages no matter how tough they were. She worked hard from morning till evening and had to make do with little to ensure a basic level of comfort. Despite all this, I cannot recall ever hearing my grandmother complain. She had a strength that I now regard as courageous. She also had faith in a God who was big enough and strong enough to get her through her trials. The larger-than-life pictures on her wall were a visual signal of that God. The God of my great-grandmother was a God upon whom she could place her substantial burdens; it was a big enough God to sustain her.

This same "God Beyond All Praising"<sup>1</sup> is the God whom suffering humanity has relied upon throughout the ages. No one escapes life without suffering. For some people, that suffering is almost unbearable. Perhaps you yourself have been through this kind of suffering. Many of those with whom I have worked have come to church precisely because they need help understanding and bearing their suffering. The God we believe in must be big enough to help us bear our burdens.

You can find images of this kind of God not only in the artwork of my great-grandmother's wall, but also in the

songs and poetry of persecuted Christians. From the cries of Job, who in his suffering acclaimed, “Blessed be God,” to the songs of the Christian slaves who sang, “There is a balm in Gilead to make the wounded whole,” believers have relied on God to strengthen them and give them courage.

Finally, a truly great God has inspired people to tremendous acts of love and sacrifice and to monumental acts of beauty. For this One, True God, people have been willing to give their lives in the service of others. Sometimes they speak up in the face of injustice and die a martyr’s death – as Archbishop Romero of El Salvador did. Sometimes they give their lives in service – as Mother Teresa of Kolkata did. For this Living Mystery, the great cathedrals of the world have been built. For this Awesome Creator, some of the most beautiful music in the world has been written. Such accomplishments witness to faith in a God worthy of spending one’s entire life for.

So, before all else, if you want this faith of yours to last you a lifetime, make sure it is faith in a God in whom you can proclaim, “How great Thou art! How great Thou art!”<sup>2</sup>

## PRACTICAL SUGGESTIONS

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Look up images of God in Scripture and use each image in prayer for a week.

Find an image of God that makes you uncomfortable and pray using that image. Often the images that make us most uncomfortable are the ones that can help expose our “idolatries” and can help us to grow in understanding.

Read the writings of saints and martyrs and explore their favourite images of God.

Listen to some African American spirituals.

The experience can be enriched by learning the history and developing an understanding of how these songs provided solace and strength to people in times of suffering.

Read the Book of Job in the Bible.

If you can, visit the great churches of Europe. If you can't visit in person, watch a video or do an online tour.

Experience the “awesomeness of God” in creation. Spend time in the natural world, especially in places like the Grand Canyon or Niagara Falls or the Rocky Mountains, where awe is the only appropriate response.

Talk to other people about how they imagine and experience God.

Visit a beautiful place of worship.

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