

Chapter I

A GLORIOUS DEFEAT

It seemed I saw a tree, more marvelous than any other,
Lifted on high, all wound about with light,
Brightest of crosses. That beacon
Gleamed with gold. Gems
Were scattered shining at its foot; and
Five were fixed upon the crossbeams.

—“The Dream of the Rood”

Here I set out to do what might seem to be a straightforward task: to recount how it happened that I walked away from atheism and entered into Christian faith.

But the story is not a simple one to tell.

When I said Yes to Christ, I thought I had reached the end of my journey, but I found that I had merely crested the nearest hill. The road, it seemed, went ever on and on, and I soon realized that the Christian life was not going to be easy.

It was exciting to learn more about theology and doctrine—go figure, I’m an academic—but assimilating this new knowledge into my daily life was much harder. I had to learn how to pray, and how to be part of a community with these strange and slightly scary people called ‘Christians’. I had to reevaluate my position as a liberal feminist; much of what I had believed turned out to be false, grounded as it was in an

incomplete and distorted understanding of what it means to be human (and female). I had to discover how to be a Christian witness in a hostile environment, as an English professor at a secular community college.

And I had to learn to see myself in a new way. I had considered myself to be reasonably 'nice' and 'good', but now I understood that even at my very best I fell infinitely short of the perfection of God, the source of all goodness. Yet the Church taught that my heavenly Father loves me completely and unreservedly. In the light of that unmerited love, I formed the desire for a stronger and deeper relationship with my Savior and for his help to become the woman he made me to be.

Perhaps the most difficult, and most transformative, part of my new life was that I was brought for the first time, and then repeatedly, to the foot of the Cross; it was there that I discovered the reality of grace.

At the time I became a Christian, outwardly I seemed to have my act together. But I was inwardly wounded, having just come out of a disastrous long-term relationship, one that had been wrongly entered into—as the Church teaches, though I didn't know it at the time—and painfully ended.

Could God's grace reach and heal the hidden wounds of my heart? I didn't know enough even to ask the question; I was still too numbed to know how badly I needed help. In my journey to Christian faith, I had focused on the Resurrection; but after my baptism, that sacramental entry into the death and Resurrection of Christ, I began to discover that the Cross is the fount of healing and transforming grace: not just part of the historical events of Jesus' Passion and death, but the place where the Incarnate God took all the black weight of human misery, and broke its power for everyone; for me.

The Cross, to put it bluntly, is where all the sh— stops. All of it. There are so many ways that one human being can hurt another, so many petty cruelties, abuses of power, belittling words; I felt the drop-by-drop accumulation of mundane misery until I feared that I would drown and began almost to wish that I would. Loneliness, betrayal, anxiety, and depression cut deep and don't always leave outward marks. But all suffering is taken up on the Cross and finds its place in the mark of the nails in Christ's hands and feet, the gash in his side: five precious wounds that he bears now and forever in his risen and glorified body.

"This is my body, which will be given up for you." Not a grace too fine and spiritual for me to grasp, but flesh and blood, bread and wine, given for me; touching, transforming, renewing mind, body, soul. Not all at once, but slowly, like the coming of spring in my New England childhood: one day, the ground is squelchy-soft with melting snow; one day, a haze of green is on the tips of winter-stark branches; one day, a bright-eyed robin hops across the lawn, and winter has passed; the summer will come true.

This narrative does not pretend to have photographic precision. I cannot depict exactly how things were because words can only do so much and, in any case, I am not the person I was then. Although I'm close enough to remember much of how I felt and thought, the changes I've gone through really have been changes.

More importantly, the meaning of my journey to faith has unfolded further as time has gone on. I have come to see aspects of my experiences that I did not notice and indeed could not have noticed at the time. I have begun to recognize the way that grace had been infusing my imagination for many years without my realizing it, like a river that ran deep below the surface of a desert, until one day, to the great

surprise of the weary traveler, it bubbled to the surface, clear and sweet and cool.

So then: this is the account of a glorious defeat, an unsought but desperately needed relinquishing of my cherished independence—an unconditional surrender in which I was brought from death to life, from trying to live without God to being led fully into his Body, the Church. And as I first knew Christ as my sovereign Lord, this is also a sketch of how I later grew to love him as my Savior.

Lastly, this is not, at the heart of it, a story of what I was clever enough to do, but rather of what I was weak enough to have done to me and for me. It is an account of God's work, a tale of grace acting in and through human beings but always issuing from him and leading back to him. And it is the story of my being brought home.

Chapter 2

THE DARK WOOD

In the midway of this our mortal life,
I found me in a gloomy wood, astray
Gone from the path direct: and e'en to tell
It were no easy task, how savage wild
That forest, how robust and rough its growth,
Which to remember only, my dismay
Renews, in bitterness not far from death.

—Dante, *The Divine Comedy: Hell*

The word ‘atheist’ comes from the Greek *a theos*; literally, ‘without God’.

That is how I would have described myself at thirty-one years old, nearly the same age as Dante in the Dark Wood. I was an atheist college professor, and I delighted in thinking of myself that way. I got a kick out of being an unbeliever; it was fun to consider myself superior to the unenlightened, superstitious masses and to make snide comments about Christians.

I thought I was completely without faith. Certainly, I would have told anyone who asked that I was not looking for God, and this was a true statement as I understood it then. I was looking for *something*—purpose, meaning, satisfaction—but since I did not then believe that God existed, it did not