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Ronda Chervin

*Saved!*

Dr. Ronda's Story of  
her Conversion to the  
Catholic Faith



by

Ronda Chervin, Ph.D.

Dear Holy Spirit, was that not you prompting my god-father? Was that not you, calling me by name?

Stunned by this profusion of supernatural happenings, but too much a thinker to proceed on that basis only, I studied books like C. S. Lewis' Mere Christianity. Lewis' famous chapter was an intellectual turning point. He shows that it is no good fence-sitting by deciding Jesus was just a wonderful man or a prophet. When a man claims to be divine he is either really God, insane or a liar? Since no one thinks Jesus was insane or a liar, he must have been divine. Reading books of Chesterton and Cardinal Newman made becoming a Catholic seem inevitable.

Wasn't that you, dear Holy Trinity, Mother Mary, Guardian Angel, all you saints, especially St. Edith Stein, calling me by name?

January 4, 1959, at 21, I was baptized. There has never been a moment in my life when I have regretted being a Catholic. Later my twin-sister, mother, and husband became Catholics, making us into a Hebrew-Catholic family. The way God saved them and me during the rest of my long life can be found in my autobiography, En Route to Eternity and also in other books by me you can find at [www.rondachervin.com](http://www.rondachervin.com)

I came upon a prayer-poem of mine on the theme of being called my name. I imagine fits your story also:

#### Tunnel of Love

Digging through the tunnel of time, sometimes I hear your song loudly, sometimes faint, sometimes my own is weak, sometimes a full-throated cry.

When we meet, no more signals, deep silence, as You carry me into eternity.



*"I have called you by name, you are mine!" (Isaiah 43:1)*

Thinking back, I imagine that my twin-sister and I were among the most alienated little children in New York City. I have never met anyone with our peculiar background. We were the children, born in 1937, of unmarried parents who met in the Communist party, but had left it shortly before our birth to become informers for the FBI. Apparently enraged communists threatened to bomb our cradle.

Both father and mother, though militant atheists, had Jewish backgrounds, but neither had been brought up as Jews – not even observing high holidays at home or at a synagogue.

As right wing political atheists of a Jewish ancestry, we didn't fit in with anyone around us: not with Catholics, not with the sprinkling of Protestants, certainly not with Orthodox religious Jews in full regalia, nor Reform Jews, nor Zionist atheist Jews, nor left-wing non-Zionist Jews. Later, as a Catholic, I realized that my desire to belong to an identifiable group forever and ever had a psychological as well as a theological reason.

My mother's parents were professional European Jews who had been invited by the Czar, at the end of the 19th century, to help modernize Russia. Once arrived, they became fervent atheistic communists. When news reached their city that the police were rounding up suspicious revolutionaries in the squares to shoot them, my grandparents, the children, and some of the Polish servants, fled to the United States.

Although my grandfather, a doctor, practiced medicine among Jewish immigrants, mostly from Eastern Europe, the family never spoke Yiddish, a mixture of German and Hebrew. Instead, they exulted in being free-thinking socialist Americans whose brotherhood was with all mankind, certainly not with ghetto Jews.

My grandfather on my father's side was of Sephardic Jew ancestry – born in Curacao, South America – a descendant of a Spanish family, De Sola, half of which became Catholic during the Inquisition. He was from the Jewish half, and had migrated to the United States under a program initiated, I believe, by secret Jewish Masons, to bring young men to North America. The idea was to enroll them in professional colleges, so that they could eventually become well to do



high status in Masonic lodges. Solomon De Sola became a Madison Avenue dentist. Since his Masonic connection was secret, I never knew about it until years after my grandfather's death. I casually mentioned to my father how silly it was that some Catholics think there is a Jewish Masonic plot to take over the world. My father laughed at that false allegation but told me my grandfather was a secret Jewish Mason! My

grandfather De Sola never observed Jewish holidays. He was an atheist.

My paternal grandmother was a blond, fragile, Pennsylvania Dutch woman who met my handsome Hispanic grandfather in the dental chair. A deeply believing Christian, Grace Geist De Sola moved up the ladder economically and doctrinally from Quaker to Presbyterian to Episcopal. She never missed a Sunday at Church, prayed constantly for her atheistic husband, son, and grandchildren, and read the Bible night and day. She was forbidden on pain of never seeing us again to mention God or religion to us. After her death I inherited a copy of her Bible printed back in 1876 with inked messages throughout such as "someday I pray that my granddaughters will read this passage."

From heaven I hope she knows that both granddaughters became Christian leaders, albeit Roman Catholic. She insisted that her son, Ralph De Sola, be baptized and attend the Presbyterian Church. Around confirmation time, my father, always brave for good or evil, stood up in the congregation and announced that he was an atheist and walked out of the Church.

Growing up my parents had nothing but scorn and ridicule for my Christian grandmother. She was used as a proof of how only weak and stupid people still believe in God after Nietzsche and evolution had proved God dead or non-existent.

However, when we were 8 years old, our parents separated for good. During this painful process we were sent for a few weeks to our grandmother's summer cottage in Fire Island. I felt miserable being dumped, the end not specified, in the house of this grandmother who loved us tenderly but whom I thought of us an idiot and a weakling. Seeing her opportunity to

introduce us to Jesus, Grace De Sola insisted on pain of missing dessert, that we sing the famous lullaby "Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so, Jesus, loves me this I know, yes, Jesus loves me." Even though, in loyalty to our parents, we acted as if we sang that hymn only under duress, I never forgot the words.

Was that the first time I heard you, Jesus, calling my name?

Fast forward: I was an eleven years old New York City girl sitting in public school at one of those old-fashioned wooden desks thoroughly marked with the graffiti carved by sixty years worth of bored pupils; the kind of desk that still had ink wells. Once a week we had show and tell. Pre-selected students had to get up and display, say, a toy plastic turtle from a Christmas trip to Florida with a two sentence narrative. Amusing. No pressure except for the child who had to perform.

But this time something different happened. There was a pause. Probably set up by a Catholic teacher, a quiet boy none of us paid attention to normally, came walking in wearing a long black robe with a white linen blouse like thing on top of it. He stood absolutely still, hands steeped in prayer, and started singing *Adeste Fidelis*. It was the first time I had ever heard sacred music. I listened in stunned, bewildered, but joyful, silence.



Was that you, my Jesus, calling my name?

At the time I didn't realize that this lad must have been an altar boy at the Catholic Church. My knowledge of Catholics was limited, negative, though in hindsight, somewhat humorous. We lived in the same neighborhood that is depicted in *West Side Story*. Before the Puerto Ricans came it was partly Jewish and partly Irish Catholic. There were only about 2 Catholics at the public school

because most Catholics children in those days went to the Catholic school. The only ones I recognized on the street were incipient or actual members of gangs. Why did I think they were Catholics? Because in those days all Catholic girls wore crucifixes around their necks and the boys wore scapulars and sometimes also had rosaries dangling out of their pockets. Besides you could tell they were Catholics because they looked so mean. Since the girls also looked sexy, I used to think that was a mark of a Catholic!



One day I was walking home with my sister and a group of pre-teen boys circled us.

"So, what are you?"

"Are you Catholic?"

"No."

"Are you Protestant?"

"No."

"Are you Jewish?"

"No." (Our parents had never told us we had a Jewish ancestry.)

"So what are you?"

"We're atheists," we answered proudly.

Having never heard of this category, they strolled off instead of beating us up as Christ-killing Jews.

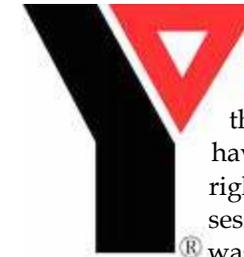
Was that you guardian angel, trying to protect us not only from physical harm but from hatred of Catholics?

How did we find out we were Jewish? Well, the public school was 99% Jewish. So on Jewish holidays everyone had a holiday. When we mentioned at home that we were the only ones there besides 2 Catholics and 1 Protestant, our parents reluctantly admitted, "Well, you are Jews. You can stay home." Hurrah!

Summers in New York City were and are torrid. Before air conditioning fathers would wait til there was no policeman in sight, bring down a big wrench

and open the fire hydrants so that the kids on the block could cool off. It was so much fun jumping up and down in the rushing water that Jewish kids forgot their fear of the Catholic kids and jumped in, too.

Affluent Jews sent their children off to summer camp in New England or Pennsylvania. Being poor after the separation of our parents, we went to the YMCA camp.



Although the YMCA was only nominally Christian, there was a tradition of having a Christmas celebration right in the middle of the July session of the camp! A nativity was assembled and the Christian counselors taught all of the campers how to sing carols. If the parents of Jewish children got wind of this, they were allowed to have their kids excused from the practice and the "idolatrous ceremony of kissing the little "doll." But my sister and I were atheists, so our mother didn't mind if we learned carols. Superstitious religious stuff was garbage as doctrine, but okay as just an old custom.

Hearing *Silent Night* and *Come Holy Night* sung not on the radio but live by beloved counselors, I was enchanted. Such beauty. Somehow different from the beauty of secular classical music or popular songs.

Was that you, Mother Mary, calling me by name?

Junior High School English class. The assignment: write a page about what you want to be when you grow up. It had to be done on the spot. "How can I know what I want to be, if I don't know the meaning of life?" I wrote spontaneously. I don't think I would have remembered this precocious philosophical question, a prophecy of my later choice to

become a philosophy professor, had the teacher not graded it A plus.

Was that you, Holy Spirit, calling me by name?

I am transferring from City College of New York to the University of Rochester, mainly because I want to have the out of town living experience I have read about in books. Looking for pictures for my wall, I gravitated toward a cheap print of Salvador Dali's crucifixion, just because of its aesthetic value, I think. Placed in a dorm wing of almost all New York City Jews, the other young women assumed I was a Catholic. Even though they were not very religious, they suggested I take it down since I



was Jewish by culture if not by faith. I refused, without knowing why.

Was that you, my Jesus, calling me by name?

Like many, though not all, atheists, I was brought up to think the sexual morality of religious people was ridiculous. Out of fear of pregnancy, I avoided going as far as sexual intercourse. But being on my own, my great wish was to shed my virginity as soon as I could find some attractive young man willing to initiate me. By God's providence I didn't get pregnant, since I would surely have had an illegal abortion if I had.

Was that you, Father of life, protecting me from life-long guilt?

One of my "friends" happened to love the music of Bach. One afternoon he sat me down in the lounge and made me listen to a Bach's Wacht Auf. I didn't like choral music at all, but I sat riveted to the chair listening with profound attention to the sacred song.

Was that you Jesus, calling me by name?

My third intimate male friend was a foreign student, in the philosophy graduate program. He

was a German who had been in the Nazi Youth as a teen, but who had been saved by a Catholic priest from remaining in that terrible movement. Many of his friends became Catholic because of the ministry of the priest. He did not, but he believed that Catholicism was the only salvation! He hoped to become a Catholic someday after sowing his wild oats. This man started feeding me apologetic books from G. K. Chesterton to Karl Adam. Not having ever read the New Testament, I hardly understood a word of these treatises. But something stuck because I started wanting to meet Catholics even after my relationship to the German broke up.

Was that you, St. Mary Magdalene, calling me by name?

During a trip a friend wanted to visit the National Museum of Art in Washington, D.C.



Hanging on a wall was Dali's Last Supper. I didn't like the picture at all from an aesthetic point of view, but I felt glued to the spot. I stared and stared at the table and the Christ feeling mystically drawn into it. Fifteen minutes later my Jewish friend had to drag me away.

Was that you, Jesus of the Eucharist, calling me by name?

Majoring in philosophy had been my way of searching for truth. In the secular universities I attended, skepticism was so much in vogue that by a year of graduate school I felt hopeless. Where was truth? Where was love? Why even live? In this frame of mind, Thanksgiving vacation in NYC, 1958, my mother, who never watched TV during the day and never surfed channels, turned on a program called The Catholic Hour. The guests were Dietrich Von Hildebrand and Alice Jourdain, soon to become Von Hildebrand. They were talking about truth and love. Spontaneously I wrote a letter to them c/o of the

station telling them of my unsuccessful search for truth.

It turned out they both live on the West Side of NYC: Alice 2 blocks from me and Dietrich 10 blocks from me. Alice invited me for a visit. Her roommate, Madeleine (later to become the wife of Lyman Stebbins founder of Catholics United for the Faith) met me at the door and ushered me into a small room. There was this very European looking woman (she came from Belgium during World War II) who looked at me with such intense interest I was



immediately drawn into her heart. She suggested I sit in on classes of Dietrich Von Hildebrand and Balduin Schwarz, his disciple, at Fordham University. Balduin's son, Stephen, a philosophy graduate student, now a philosophy professor and pro-life apologist, could bring me up to the Bronx and show me around.

I sat in on a few classes. What impressed me most was not the ideas of these Catholic philosophers which I didn't understand very well, but their personal vitality and joy. The skepticism, relativism, and historicism, that characterized most secular universities at that time left many of the professors sad and desiccated. Drawn to this joy, as well as the loving friendliness with which everyone in this circle of Catholics moved out to greet a newcomer, I quickly switched from Johns Hopkins to Fordham to continue my studies. That the wife of Balduin Schwarz was a Jewish woman converted from an atheistic background certainly also made my entry into this new phase of my life easier.

After a few months at Fordham, I could not help but wonder how come the brilliant lay Catholics and the brilliant Jesuits in the

philosophy department could believe those ideas such as the existence of God, the divinity of Christ, the reality of objective truth, moral absolutes, and the need for Church-going. Obviously it was not only stupid and weak people who thought this way. What is more they could prove that the mind could know truth and that there were universal ethical truths in a few sentences.

Was that you, Holy Spirit, removing road-blocks to my eventual conversion to the Absolute Truth which is a Trinity of Persons? Were you calling me by name?

I was sad to think that I would not be able to study with these wonderful people during the summer since they went back to Europe every year during those months. By now I found it hard to enjoy my sinful relationships with cynical if interesting men. Unexpectedly Professor Schwarz suggested I go on a Catholic art tour with them. My money problems could be solved by a scholarship. Later I realized this money was probably donated by one of the circle in the hope that deeper acquaintance with my professor would facilitate conversion.

To understand the miraculous character of the events that follow you have to know I hated all but modern art. This was owing to forced trips to museums as a child. I liked colorful impressionistic pictures but nothing earlier than the 20th century, and certainly not old-fashioned



Catholic art. And, even though by now I thought there was truth, I had no knowledge of God, Christ, or the Church and no interest in learning more. So, my only reason for going on the tour was to cling to my dear new friends.

The first miracle came when I saw Chartres Cathedral in France. I

looked at the amazing shape of that Church with the beautiful stained glass windows and I started to cry. The line from Keats: "Beauty is truth, truth is beauty," came to mind and I asked myself, "How could this be so beautiful if there is no truth to it, just medieval ignorance?"

Wasn't that you, God of Beauty, calling me by name?

The pilgrims on the Catholic Art Tour all went to daily Mass. I started going also out of curiosity. Seeing my noble wise philosophy professor on his knees astounded and disgusted me. I wanted to jerk him up and say no man should kneel. "You are the captain of your soul, you are the master of your fate."

Finding out that I had never read the New Testament, and seizing the moment of grace, Schwarz, my god-father to be, searched through bookstores in Southern France until he found a Bible in English for me.

Second miracle: on the tour bus, reading the Gospels without understanding much, I fell asleep. I had a dream. There was a large room with tables. Jesus and Mary were sitting backs to the wall. Mary beckoned me and said in Hebrew "Come sit with us." (I don't know Hebrew but in the dream I did.)

Wasn't that you, Blessed Lady of Zion, calling me by name?

Third miracle: I got the impulse to kneel on the floor of the hotel and say a skeptic's prayer I thought my professor had told me as a joke:

"God, if there is a God, save my soul, if I have a soul."



The next day we hit Lourdes. My godparents to be, the Schwarzes, were praying that I would not be put off by the rows of trinket vendors. I said, "I'm used to 42nd St., nothing bothers

me." Fourth miracle: I was touched to the core by the Immaculate Mary hymn of the pilgrims sung in candlelight procession in many languages.

Wasn't that you, dear Immaculate Mother, calling me by name?

Fifth miracle: again, the art I thought I hated, was used by God to reach me. In a museum in Florence I saw Da Vinci's unfinished nativity. I looked at the Virgin Mary, so simple, pure, and sweet and I wept. She had something I would never have: purity! For the first time I thought of myself as a sinner. I felt impelled to tell my mentors, sure they would banish me. Of course, they didn't. Jesus came to save sinners.

Wasn't that you, Our Lady, who called me by name?

Sixth miracle: The face of Christ in a



tapestry of Raphael came alive, not for the others, but just for me!

Wasn't that you, my Jesus, calling me by name?

Seventh miracle: the tour included viewing Pope Pius XII at St. Peter's. I had dreaded being bored at museums, but having to be in a crowd watching the Pope, who I thought of vaguely as dressed up in the gold that belonged to the poor, was more than I could stand. I would go shopping instead. My mild professor insisted I go. So I went. At the end of the ceremony the Pope was blessing the disabled and sick. It was hard to see him because of the crowd. My rather old not very strong god-father to be lifted me up so I could see the charity of the face of the Holy Father. Pope Pius XII had exactly the same expression in his eyes, as the living face of Jesus from the tapestry.