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# CATHOLIC

A LENTEN JOURNEY  
OF PRAYER AND  
TRANSFORMATION

*"Return to me with all your heart,  
with fasting, with weeping,  
and with mourning."*

- Joel 2:12





## How a non-Catholic sociologist became a Catholic theologian



**DEACON BEN  
LOCASTO**

ministers to the parishioners of Good Shepherd Parish, in addition to his diocesan roles.

**IN THE SUMMER OF 1987, Cynthia Toolin-Wilson reluctantly consented to accompany her husband and mother-in-law on a trip to Rome. Her husband Jim and his mother were devout Catholics, Cynthia was not. She was not anti-Catholic, she just wasn't particularly interested in things religious. But, since visiting Rome was her elderly mother-in-law's lifelong dream, Cynthia agreed to go on the condition that she would not have to visit any "religious" sites. Her husband and his mother would do the religious things, and she would go unaccompanied to see the historical sites.**

For most of the trip, Cynthia was on her own, joining her family only for nightly dinners. However, she did join them on one tour of Rome, which, she says, "had only one religious thing: the catacombs." Cynthia had it all figured out: While her husband and mother-in-law were busy traipsing through the ancient Roman tombs, she would remain on the tour bus, reading a

good book. Cynthia soon learned that God had other plans.

When they arrived at the catacombs and the people departed the bus, the driver turned off the air-conditioning. Within minutes the bus was sweltering in Rome's summer sun. So Cynthia was forced to join the tour group, solely to keep from wilting on the bus. Upon entering the catacombs,

she saw a group of people standing in front of a priest who was celebrating Mass at a stone altar. "To show you the level of my ignorance, I could see that they were having Mass, I knew what that looked like and I thought to myself, 'What's wrong with these people, it's not Sunday, why are they having Mass?'"

Then something happened that forever changed the course of



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her life. While the priest was speaking, she had what she calls “the ticker tape experience.” In her mind, she saw a message that looked as if someone had typed some words on a ticker tape scrolling across her mind. It stated: “the Truth is found in the Catholic Church.” In her vision, the letter “T” was capitalized.

“And instead of saying, ‘What just happened?’ I said to myself, ‘Whoever did that didn’t spell truth right; the “T” shouldn’t be capitalized.’” She laughs when she thinks of this now and said, “At which point, I picture God throwing up His hands in distress.”

Later, as she pondered this in the catacombs, it became clear that what just happened to her had a far greater significance than just a grammatical error. “It was probably the most significant moment in my life. I knew that it did not come from inside me, it came from outside, and there is only one entity in all being that has the capacity to do that to someone.”

Within three weeks of returning home from Rome, she decided to convert to Catholicism. She began studying the faith with the

pastor of St. Martha’s Church, Enfield, Father Stanley Smolinski, and met with him weekly for more than a year. At one point, he commented to her that she was “more interested than most” who came to learn about the faith. He plied her with books to read and suggested that after she was welcomed into the Church that she take some theology courses at Holy Apostles College and Seminary in Cromwell. True to form, Cynthia not only took some courses in theology, but she pursued a master’s degree in the subject. And because she had not taken any undergraduate theology courses, she was required



to take 32 courses (96 credits) in order to complete the degree.

Her desire to learn about the faith was insatiable. But, it wasn't just for the sake of knowledge. "The more I learned, the more it changed me," she explained. The more she learned of the beauty of the faith, the more in love with it she became. And again this was obvious to others. Father Douglas Mosey, then the rector of Holy Apostles, echoed Father Smolinski's comment of some years before, telling her, "You are more interested in this than most." And he promised her that if she earned a licentiate in theology, he would hire her to teach the subject at the college. Once again, Cynthia was off to the races.

**"I didn't even know that women could teach theology; I thought it was a male thing."**

A licentiate in theology is a two-year program in advanced theological study designed for clergy, religious and lay persons to further their theological expertise for service in official capacities in religious communities and dioceses and for teaching in higher education, diocesan schools and seminaries. It is a demanding course of study that required great sacrifices from both Cynthia and her husband, who had to live in a camper in Washington, D.C., while she studied there at the Dominican House of Studies.

After she earned a licentiate, Father Mosey, true to his word,

hired her to teach theology. "I didn't even know that women could teach theology; I thought it was a male thing." Twenty-seven years later, she is still teaching online courses for the college and for Pontifex University in Atlanta. However, had Cynthia's mother had her way, none of this would have occurred, because her mother had attempted to abort her.

When Cynthia was 11 years of age, her mother called her over and told her that she had something "important" to tell her. Cynthia's immediate thought was, "What did I do now?" since whenever her mother spoke to her like that it was usually to reprimand.

Her mother then proceeded to inform her that when she discovered that she was pregnant with her, she had taken a "medicine" to make her "go away." She also told her that it was her grandfather who had gone to the pharmacy to purchase the abortifacient. "These were two people I loved," Cynthia said. Her mother then said that the reason she stopped taking the "medicine" was it was affecting her health, and she was afraid that she herself would perish. At the time, none of this made sense to 11-year-old Cynthia, but as time passed, she came to think of this as: "So death is OK for me but not you?" Her relationship with her mother was never the same.

"I am rabidly anti-abortion; anytime anyone gives me a chance

to talk about abortion, I tell them," she said, adding, "It's not because I am great, I'm not great." She just believes that she has done the best she could to teach the faith and make life somewhat better for those she touched. And that would not have been had she been aborted.

This, of course, is the bane of abortion. Beyond the killing of an innocent life, beyond the untold, denied and unspoken trauma to the mother and father, there is the consequence of the loss of the potential contribution of the unborn victim. Who knows if today we could have a cure for cancer, or the technology to purify the atmosphere or wise global leaders who would bring peace to this broken world, if those who God slated to bring these gifts to the world had not been aborted?

Had Cynthia's mother gone ahead with her efforts to abort her, we would not have this person who has contributed to the education and formation of more than 200 priests, numerous deacons, including myself, and hundreds of nuns and has taught, perhaps, thousands of lay persons. Our Church would have lost a vital contributor, someone who has taught the faith and positively influenced others for 27 years — and continues to do so today.



**Dr. Toolin-Wilson has written a memoir entitled *Survivor: A Memoir of Forgiveness***

To purchase a copy, go to:  
[enroutebooksandmedia.com/survivor/](http://enroutebooksandmedia.com/survivor/)