

Letters to Theophilus

Being some stories of journeys of faith

By and Based on the Books of Robert J. Cormier (www.thefaithkit.org)
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Dear Theophilus I

Dear Theophilus,

From the bottom of our hearts, Camille and I thank you for the interest you have shown in Stephen and his upbringing, and in gratitude for the questions you have put to us, I have decided to try to answer them.

Stephen's coming was something of a surprise, but there could be no doubt that his life was a gift from God, and this is how we embraced him.

Though Stephen was our new-born son, and the most beautiful child we had ever seen, we tried to remember he was still a baby we could so easily spoil. It wasn't easy. It was hard not to dote on him, especially in the beginning, but finally we started to notice what we were told: "The more attention they get, the more attention they want." After that, we felt more free to go about our business, and to pay attention to each other.

Now this did not stop us from running to him when he began to cry when we put him to bed, but finally we tried what we were told: "Let him cry; he will get over it." The first night it took twenty terrible minutes. The second night it took ten.

Resisting his demands... this turned out to be the secret... and this made possible balance—balance between spoiling and teaching, balance between making him feel secure and making him so needy of attention he would never feel secure.

The other thing we had to resist was over-protection. Probably he could have walked down the stairs all by himself weeks before we actually let him, but it was hard to let him, and doing so was a definite, difficult choice. I can say the same of our decision to stop making decisions about him every time he wandered out of sight (on the property).

With TV we were less conflicted. Basically we let him watch when we were watching—this meant he was mostly sleeping—and when he got older he got to pick a program, *one* program, to watch per day. We hardly ever bent on this and so he hardly ever pestered us about it.

Instead we spent a lot of time talking. Since we did *not* find that baby talk came easily to us, we talked to him as if he were capable of conversation, and, lo and behold, he became capable of conversation. Conversation was mostly at supper, and most of the time we expected him to listen. He was corrected until he learned not to interrupt. Not long after that he learned the difference between contributing to conversation and changing the subject.

Speaking of subjects: Not more than once a week did we get around to work with him on his numbers and letters. This was less than ideal but it didn't seem to cost him much. We were better at answering questions; and the better became the questions, the better became the answers. This was fun.

He also had fun with his friends. We ourselves had not the least idea of how to teach him to make friends, and as it turned out he had not the least need of help.

But life was not all fun. Rightly or wrongly he began to be punished even before he started breaking the rules. When he would not be still, and whenever there was a tantrum, he was put in his room immediately, and he learned immediately that he could not come out until we called him. Other than that, he was punished—mostly this same way—whenever we had to tell him more than twice....

He was punished more than twice, but not much more, and once he was four, hardly at all. By then he had learned the meaning of a certain tone of voice.

Soon thereafter, it was time for school. We chose St. Agnes because we felt you should send your children to your parish school if it was a good school and you could afford it. We don't think he wanted to go to school, but we were pretty quick about telling him that "everybody has to go to school" and he gave up on the idea that he had the option not to go. Fortunately, all his friends also had to go to school—a couple were already in school—and we're sure it helped that he didn't go alone.

The adjustment came quickly, though he never got used to getting up in the morning. He did OK in school; but he didn't want to do his

homework, and we also had to push him to do his housework; but he had to do it and we did not pay him. Otherwise he motivated himself. He had his “projects”; and he and his friends played every sport—actually they played everything—and we were happy as long as he was home for supper.

Early on he got a football—one of those junior size like we never had—and other sports’ stuff as soon as it seemed that he could use it. He also got little cars—which inspired him to use our house to make a city—a couple of skill games, and a blackboard. By and large, we kept to the Christmas and birthday rule, and he really never expected anything at any other time.

His friends got more, and this was a bit of a problem, but we confronted it head on with the points that one might make to another adult. Once, unfortunately, when we criticized the decisions of another parent—who, we said, was trying to buy love—he repeated what we said and got into a pretty good fight. This was our fault but we told him it was his.

It was not our fault that he picked up some filthy language but our reaction was so strong that he did not keep it long.

We cannot say that Stephen was raised without fear. Certain bad behavior was going to make us angry and that was going to mean trouble for him. Whether our anger was clearly focused on his behavior, and not on him, we cannot say for certain. We did our best, and sometimes he got the best of us.

Certainly he was not afraid to question us, even about the rules, and we were happy when he questioned us about life, and especially about God. From the beginning our philosophy was: “Say nothing you have to take back later.” In other words, we told him plainly that most Bible stories were stories, that he did not need to fear hell, and that God was never angry. As his questions got better we told him that “creation was signed,” that “God always was,” and that we are here, before we go to heaven, so that we could have something to say about who we will be.

Though it was our intention to be as open about sex, he didn’t seem to want to hear about it from us. This was a relief and a problem. It was a relief for obvious reasons; it was a problem because we could not let him operate on information he gained from who-knows-who. In the end, we contented

ourselves by letting him acknowledge that he already knew certain basic things about biology, and what you do with a girl means “I love you,” OR DOES IT? We got a little *help* from television because, on those occasions when we saw together something we should not have seen together, we commented on it. In this, we were consistent.

We also tried to be consistent in speaking up about faith’s view of almost anything that got our attention. This began with our own decisions, about what to see, what to do, what to buy, and, once he could understand, we did the same with the issues of the day. But we had no “cause” and we are not proud of it. I guess like other people in a comfortable community, society’s problems seemed far away, and the problems in other countries were beyond anything that we thought we could do. (Though we still feel that if we were given a doable, one family’s share of the solution to a problem, we would do it.)

We were absolutely consistent about church on Sunday and grace before supper. (But we prayed fast, and sometimes ate faster.) Stephen came to church with us whether he liked it or not. Mostly he did not. And when it came to church we had no other expectations for him.

But we could hardly complain. Month by month we saw him take three steps forward and only one step back. For us, the one step back was an occasional childish attitude or interest in something too worldly. The three steps forward involved his interest in the world, and what he might learn, and what he might do, and one day *would* do. He continued to ask questions, and slowly but surely so did we. We learned that we could learn from him. I think that this made him feel quite good.

Balance. This is what we hoped for, and this is what for the most part we got. Balance between fun and work. Balance between friends and family. (He always chose family where family traditions were involved. We had many.) Balance between interest in girls and disinterest in girls. Balance between interest in things that cost money and things that did not.

Balance. This is what we hoped for. And then we got more. We knew he was developing faith; it supported his decency and allowed him to be happy with (mostly) good clean fun. But then, we saw, he was developing love—real love for real people who had never done, or could never do, anything for him. He was not yet in high school when he began to talk about

fatherless kids in the city. Not fatherless himself, it was not clear how he knew what a handicap this was. Nonetheless, what he said about the problem was true, and he even convinced a couple of friends to care about it too. Unbeknownst to us, they figured out the buses and they got themselves into the city, and they even got in to speak to the father of a church full of these fatherless kids. I suppose they were too sincere to be sent away, so instead they were sent to the catechism director who later called me. Thus it was that we gave permission before Stephen actually asked us. He was to be the helper in a class of third graders.

He liked it. Apparently he got good at it. And he was thrilled when he was invited to be a junior counselor at their camp.

The night of the fire he thought that there were still two kids in the cabin. (There were not.) Despite the enormous flames and heat, he got in the door. The explosion followed so quickly that we do not believe that he was ever burned. The explosion was so powerful that the loss of Stephen was instant and obvious.

Of course, this news was the shock of our lives, and Stephen's loss produced an anguish that I will not try to describe. But the shock has passed. And now, we have discovered, we experience Stephen where he is. He is with God and right here. His life in God has become for us a beacon which reminds us of our future, our hope, and the truth of our faith. I wish you could have known Stephen here on earth, but I know that he is already pleased to meet you in heaven.

I hope you feel we have answered your questions.

This story was a concretization of "The Eight Points of Parenting" found in the author's *The Marriage Book*.

You might be interested in "The Continuing Adventures of Stephen" at the back of this book.

Dear Theophilus II

Dear Theophilus,

I guess this is your way—my friend Camille told me so—to ask people big questions and expect big answers, and I accept your questions to me and I will try to tell you my spiritual story.

I don't think my childhood was all that exceptional. There was love in the house, though not too much faith, and I definitely remember that there was much, too much television.

I behaved OK, did OK in school, and had enough of what I took for fun. (And I never noticed that everything was provided, and that I was never expected to be creative or self-reliant, and never permitted to be at risk.)

By the time I was a teenager I probably looked like one of those jaded, bored, and boring young people we market to today.

Of course, I was into relationships, and these went the typical route—each was a very big deal as long as it lasted.

Finally— I must have grown up a little—I got into a real relationship, and before we settled down we had real problems. Like almost everyone else, we went through a phase of preoccupation, then insecurity (jealously IS a monster), and then we settled down. (I think this happened because we had no choice—it was accept the other person or end up with nothing—and I now see that it took a lot more growing before either of us was really focused on the other on account of real love.)

The kids helped us along.

Before the kids we were just jaded teenagers with more money. Everything was money and show, and nothing was really fun, and absolutely nothing was really important. How many dinners can you eat, and how much can you spend on your clothes or your car before you start to feel like somebody's fool?

Life was getting pointless, and yet we were clutching onto it tighter, fearful of that vast “what might happen,” in denial over aging, and when the aging stopped... forget it... we couldn't even say it.

Then came the kids. Here were little people totally dependent on us, who showed love to us, and threatened us not a bit. When the kids went to school, we started to see other kids, and I believe that this is where we started to see the world as filled with souls and NOT competitors.

It was reflection on these souls, young and old, which turned me toward God. It started with the TV news. There was so much bad news, and there were so many people suffering so badly. What was worse, there was nothing that could be done about it. Oh sure, long-term, we might do things to make the world a better place, but right now there are people far from here who are suffering badly and they are going to keep suffering no matter what. Indeed, isn't it true that (almost) countless people have already lost in torment their one opportunity to live? Weren't these people people, just like you and me?

God is bad? In other words, good is bad? That couldn't be. So then what? Thankfully the information was so there: God made us for life in heaven; here is where we prepare; He works with us through what He sends; He is making us THE FAMILY where all of us will share our life with Him.

Faith saved me. It allowed me to face life—and not despair.

And I do mean “despair.” Even as I was pondering the problems of people at a distance, I had finally started to ponder the problems of me, of life, its limits, its purpose, and its end. Before faith began to answer my questions, things didn't look too good. It seemed my only choice was NOT to think and just keep moving. Faith saved me from this.

And now I knew what “faith” really is.

In the beginning I thought that faith is what they told you to believe. And I understood that if you did not believe what they told you, well, that was bad.

As I got older, I “tried” faith. I prayed for stuff. I said my prayers. I said, mostly to myself, that “I really believe that You can do this for me.”

When finally I came to understand that faith is experiencing God, and understanding Him (a little) and creation and life, at first I was a little proud. Now, I thought, I know more than other people. I am holier than all these losers. (But it still bothered me when the losers didn't seem to lose.)

Then I grew up. I came to understand that faith is its own reward, that faith gives understanding, and hope, and peace, and that these are better than any-thing a person can have. I began to feel more alive than I had been, and I was no longer threatened by those who seemed to have less faith. Instead I was saddened.

More and more—month by month, it seemed—life was getting richer. Greater peace made it possible to sit and think. Thinking became dreaming, with the idea that I was getting a glimpse of heaven. More and more it was less and less about me alone; it was more and more about seeing God.

Even more exciting was the thought that there was more to come, the idea that I would continue to grow into a deeper experience of life, level by level, and that just like the last one and the one before that, each one would come as a surprise and involve something I could not have imagined until the day it came.

But there was one dramatic day I DID see coming. As my faith had grown so had my discomfort with the company. We know this stuff is not good for people, and still we put it out. Ironically, the more uncomfortable I became, the higher I climbed. (Some of this was DUE to faith, I think; faith made me more objective with facts and more effective with people.) I had not been CEO for a year when I knew I had to go. Oh, I did try first to get the board to commit to a new direction, but they told me there was no money in it, and the shareholders didn't pay us to make their moral decisions. For me the moral decision was clear—but difficult. In the short-term I would be assured only of a job working with my hands, and the kids were not grown, and the house was not paid. For a while I played with this problem in my mind. I thought of various “compromise” solutions. I was tempted to stop thinking entirely. But in the end I saw that faith had become too important to me.

In leaving I told myself, and others, that I had trust in God—not necessarily for a better deal here, but for eternity, and that I expected only to experience life more deeply, and this is what has happened.

Thank you for your interest.

Dear Theophilus III

Dear Theophilus,

I must admit that I was a little surprised to get your letter asking to hear my story. I say “surprised” because, perhaps a little prideful, I thought that my story was already pretty well known.

Nonetheless, here is the short of it.

I did not get a good start at life. My father was gone from the house by the time I remember, and on those occasions when I saw him, he was drunk or with some other woman who was never my mother.

My mother did her best, but there were three of us, money was short, she was busy, and the neighborhood was bad.

I don't remember actually quitting school. What I do remember is that I had a harder and harder time understanding anything that anyone was saying, took things less and less seriously, started to cut classes, and then stopped going all together.

I got into drugs because it was the only thing that my friends in the street seemed to care about (besides girls). I stayed on the street once I was kicked out of the house.

I ended up in rehab after I got picked up for a smash and grab on the private car of an off-duty cop.

I did not take the program seriously.

I was back when I got picked up for boosting big screen TVs. This time I was told that I would do real time if I got picked up again.

I guess it was this that got me to talk seriously with my counselor. This, and her pretty good questions. I told about my life, and slowly but surely I found out what I felt. I found out that I felt bad about my life, and my self, and that I was very angry about just about everything.

I think she was smart. She let me talk, and talk, and talk some more. She asked me what I thought about all kinds of stuff and even about life, and death, and God, and prayer.

I guess I eventually got tired “telling” and finally started asking. I wanted to know what she thought about things.

At first, her talk about her faith sounded a little too pretty. But she was consistent, and when I tried to pick apart what she was telling me—about a God who knows what He’s doing and stuff like that—I started to listen to her explanations and they surprised me. The bottom line was always the same: She said that life was about going to God, not getting stuff here.

The bigness of these ideas! That alone got to me a little. And then there was her tone of voice. Even when she was trying to get something into my head there was a peacefulness about her voice. If ever she got loud it seemed sureness and eagerness that I get it, but never frustration. It was that voice, and her peace, and I do think she loved me a little.

Actually, you know, she was sort of pretty, but she was married and I really wasn’t attracted to her in that way anyway. But I started to be attracted to that peace in her voice and the goodness in her face.

I realized that I needed to know God but I didn’t know what to do.

She told me that to get to know anybody you talk to them. She said I should talk to God in my head out of my heart. She also suggested I try some prayers and she gave me a little prayer book called “Dear God.”

I said I couldn’t read so good, and so she read to me the prayers in the book.

I liked them. They helped me remember what I was supposed to know about life. This helped me recognize the words and I learned to read that little prayer book.

I started to see life through the eyes of my little faith. I tried to think about it when hard things would happen. I started to make choices because

of it when there were choices that had to be made. My little faith started to grow.

Thank you God, You put people around me I could talk to. I had questions, and even more than that, I just had to talk about what I was discovering. Just talking about it was one of the best things about having it.

Oh there were ups and downs, and a couple of failures, but I now knew about forgiveness and struggle, and I knew that there was nothing better.

When I had been clean for four years I started my studies. And now I have been ordained for the eleven best years of my life.

I hope you got something out of this short version of my story.

The “Dear God” prayer book is available in The Faith Kit at www.thefaithkit.org.

Dear Theophilus IV

Dear Theophilus,

I say again that it was a pleasure to meet you, and I enjoyed our conversation. As you can see, I have decided to do what you asked and to put my little story in writing.

As I mentioned to you, I was from a very religious family. It wasn't just church on Sunday, *every* Sunday, but my parents were members of a couple of groups and they took us to meetings, and I myself was in the youth group, and we also prayed at home, and our home was filled with statues and pictures and spiritual sayings nicely framed.

I can't say I was unhappy about it until about sophomore year. All of a sudden—it seemed to me—all this religion was a reason not to let me do what I wanted to do: to go out with my friends, to stay out a little bit late, to go to a movie.... They just said “no” or that it was “wrong” or even “sinful.” I didn't like this and, in retrospect, I think it made me mad at religion, and soon I resisted going to church even on Sunday. (This only made things worse at home.)

By the time I could go to college I was glad to get out, and when I got to college... well, I didn't even know where the chapel was.

Most of my early friends had no religion at all, and they didn't think that anything was a sin. This bothered me a little, but I wanted to have fun too and so, for a while, everything was cool.

I did get a little shook up when some of my “friends” showed that they were really nobody's friends, and I got a little more shook up when a couple of others hit the wall. One guy over-dosed and died.

This kind of stuff started us talking. “So, where is he now?” And there were others questions. What's going to happen to us? What's the point of life? What's the difference? Who cares? Does anybody care?

There were some who cared, but they all had very different ideas. There was a Bible guy. And a girl from some cult (who I wouldn't have talked to at all but she was good-looking). And there were a few who knew something about the church, but they all believed different things—or rather they said they didn't believe in this or that. Then there were our professors who didn't seem to believe in anything and rolled their eyes whenever religion was mentioned. (They wanted us to think that they knew more about things than we did but I'm not sure exactly what they knew, and they were far too smug to be asked any really important questions.)

Life changed at a baptism. I was asked to be a godfather, whatever that meant, but one thing it did mean was that I had to go to some sort of "class." The priest who gave it was kind of interesting—he got our attention by saying that "faith explains life, overcomes death, and is its own reward at every moment"—but then he also said that to baptize a baby we would have to profess our own faith and also promise that we would practice our faith for the sake of the kid and stuff like that.

This was a problem. I don't know if anyone else had a problem with it—from what I could see several people probably should have had a problem with it—but it was a problem for me. I asked the priest if I could talk to him about it and he said "sure."

I told my story: where I was, where I was *not* when it comes to religion. He asked me "why?" I basically said that I was confused. We talked about this a little more and then he gave me a piece of paper called "I Believe." (I am writing it out for you because I love it and I want you to see it.)

I believe in God because everything in and around me says to me, "I must have come from somewhere."

I believe in heaven because I cannot imagine that God gave us life only to take it away.

I believe that love is the way to heaven because love is obviously the best thing that we can grow into, and it makes sense to me that God would give us an opportunity to be involved in our own creation—it's better for us if we are.

I believe that God has a plan for everything that happens because I cannot imagine a God who doesn't, and it looks like a brilliant way for God to make us the people He wants us to be while still involving us in our own creation.

I believe that we were made to be a family because I recognize that my life is owed to human history, and because believing that we are going to share God's life as a family makes sense of God's plan for human history.

I am a Christian because I believe that Jesus' teachings, and the story of Jesus' life, speak for God better than anything else I have ever heard—or expect to hear—and because I recognize that if God had not sent someone to speak for Him, there is no way we would ever feel called to be one family in faith.

I am a Catholic because I believe that the Church is the family in faith that Jesus called us to be, and I believe THAT because no other church sees our unity as essential, and no other church has a structure that allows it to provide teachings that make sense to our times.

Then he asked me, “which of these things do you not believe?”

I did not know what to say.

Then he said to me: “Maybe what you rejected was the symbol because you didn't see the substance. Maybe no one explained it well. Maybe this is your chance to realize that the biggest religion in the world exists for a reason. Maybe this your moment to take another look at the only explanation of life that can offer you hope and peace, and *not* contradict the best ideas you have about God. And maybe you might be grateful to know that your Church respects your mind and proposes to explain things so you can see it for yourself.”

I remember every word of this little speech because it gave birth to my spiritual life. What then happened was that he gave me some more material, a couple of titles, and a website to look at: thefaithkit.org. He offered to keep the conversation going—but said that I could still be a godfather even if I didn't. I read some of the stuff he suggested, and I did meet with him again. (I had questions. He had answers.) As it turned out, I showed up at that baptism, said yes to the profession of faith, and meant it.

Life has gotten better every day since.

I hope you feel you got the story you were looking for.

“I Believe” is available at www.thefaithkit.org/panorama. Just go to the Mini-Books menu and click on “Seven Statements of Faith.”

Dear Theophilus V

Dear Theophilus,

I must say I consider it quite—what shall we call it—“bold” of you to solicit information about my spiritual story. (After all, we have never met!) But perhaps you knew what I believe: My story is a story of God’s goodness and I do not have a right to withhold it. I have told it to others in person, and so now I will try my hand at writing it. (Bear with me!)

I guess I was a pretty typical person of today. No big sins, no big faith. I was into the world and what I could get. The result of this was that I got into debt. Then I got laid off. It wasn’t my fault; the economy went South and the company wanted to save money; and I was laid off—NOT temporarily. I did start looking right away, and collecting, but the economy had gone South and even when I did get a lead somebody got there before me. (Everybody knew somebody and I didn’t know anybody.)

When the money got tight the fights started. This is not to say that our marriage was all that great to start with, but things sure got worse when she starting screaming whenever I spent money on me, and I screamed back because that was my only defense. By the end we were fighting over everything and so I guess it shouldn’t have surprised me when she left, but it did. I tired to talk to her about working things out but she didn’t want to talk about anything and I started to think that maybe she was “talking” to somebody else.

I lost the apartment about a month later and had to move in with my brother, my *younger* brother. He was OK about it, but just OK.

The pains in my chest started soon thereafter. At first, I thought it was stress. Who wouldn’t? How not? But then I felt something that wasn’t there before and so I got myself on the charity line at the hospital so I could get myself checked out. Who even knew that men could get breast cancer? At least the embarrassment temporarily blocked out the fear. But I would still need chemotherapy and this meant that I would also be losing my hair.

Then my Dad died.

He had been sick for a long time so it wasn't really a surprise but it was the last thing I needed then. I don't really remember how I got through it.

But I do remember how I felt once everything was over. First, I got more angry than I already was. This made me a bad driver and a bad person to live with. I calmed down a little when my brother said that if I didn't calm down I would have to leave. That's when the fear hit me. It hit me and it stayed with me. It was there in the morning. It was there at night. The only thing that took it away, at least for a little while, was drinking. That meant that I started drinking more, and earlier every day. I mean that I was drinking every day, and that I started drinking earlier in the day, and earlier. This meant that my brother had to talk to me again.

I got mad and went out. (I hadn't started drinking that day.) I walked and walked with no place to go. I was angry, and frustrated, and scared, and disgusted with my self as well. Finally, the inevitable crept into my mind. "Life is not worth living," I said to myself. And I actually thought about ending it. I actually thought about it. And I thought about where I would be one second later—if there is nothing after this. Being nothing... forever ... that didn't appear to be much gain. And if there is a God who has life for us after we die... it didn't seem that getting there this way would be good for my future.

I dropped the idea but this left me with the question, What now? Is misery my only hope? On paper, at least, I could see that there was only one place to go for hope. With nowhere else to go I turned to God. I prayed. I realized that despite my recent whining about how I was "losing my faith" the truth is that this was just a way to yell at God, even to try to hurt Him. Indeed, the more I said it, the clearer it was that I was talking to someone. Finally, I decided to talk to God openly.

"So why did you give me this messed up life? Why!"

Eventually my question became my answer.

Pleading with God became a more and more obvious experience *of* God. The "why" became less important than the fact: God did give me this messed up life. Why? For reasons He chose. Could this be to hurt me?

Certainly not. Then why? Well, it was a challenge, was it not? Wasn't dealing with it as He dealt it would be the best thing a person could do? This helped me to see that God had not put less into me than others.

Besides, it wasn't going to be forever—nor would a *good* life here. My only real hope was life with God. That was still coming and I was still in a position to go in good shape.

Things changed for me that day.

I continued to battle with my worldly problems but I did so in peace. Eventually even the practical pieces of life began to fall (back) into place. But this was not the best result of my faith, and it is not the main source of my happiness now. This is my story, which I hope you found helpful.

Dear Theophilus VI

Dear Theophilus,

I will begin by saying that I understand your interest in my conversion, yours were fair questions, your little guidelines were clear, and so I am happy to respond.

I am from a good family with a big social conscience. From the time I can remember my parents were environmentally and globally conscious, and active for the homeless. Though we were *far* from homeless, we helped at shelters, went to demonstrations, and, I think, we were generally generous.

We were not religious. I remember asking what religion we were, and I remember being told that our family respected everyone and didn't make choices that pulled people apart. We had a Christmas tree but did nothing for Easter, always voted but never said grace.

Anyone could see that my parents were sincere and sacrificial, and I saw this too and admired them. I did well at school—it seemed that doing well at school was part of our “religion”—and I got into a good school with the intention of studying the right things with the idea that I would help people.

And I did. Right out of school I got a low paying job with an advocacy group (for what I would rather not say) and I moved out to a place in the city.

It was satisfying, very satisfying, at first. Especially when we went to the people we thought we were helping. They seemed grateful; I felt important; and it was so easy to tell other people that “this is what life is all about.”

Oh, there were disappointments, people who weren't grateful, others who didn't seem to care, but dealing with this, “this is what life is all about.”

Ironically, it was actually *success* that disturbed my views. The fact is: We had our share of successes, and sometimes there was follow-up, and

what I saw there was not too up-lifting. The better our clients did, the more they became like every other worldly, modern person. They cared about “things,” were manipulated by media, and lived the life distracted. They ended up with the same sort of problems as the rest of the society, and certainly cared about no one but themselves. Of course, they always *said* that they were grateful to us, and were going to do all they could to give back, but this was rarely what we saw.

This was disturbing enough. But what was worse were the questions that it provoked: So how are we really giving people a better life? Is this really about them—or us? And if it was about us, what was it about?

Even in those cases where people lived well and gave back, I was beginning to be bothered by the question: How is this really worth my life?

The question was aggravated by tiredness, lack of support from the same society that getting benefits from all our work, and signs of my mortality.

I was in the midst of these reflections when I was sent to see the director of a program run by the Church. (We were thinking of some sort of partnership with this program.) The program director was not clergy, but he seemed clergy in his politeness and the décor in his office. There was a cross, a Mary, and a framed piece called “A Preamble to the Life of Faith.” I have enclosed a copy with this letter. I think if you read it you will see easily how it got my attention.

“Wow,” I said to the program director.

“Pretty basic stuff,” he said to me.

“Not to me,” I replied, “I’m not really used to thinking about all these whys and forevers.”

“Oh,” he said, “I can’t imagine *not* thinking about it. If I didn’t I’m sure I would have burnt out a long time ago.”

“Does it really do that much for you?”

“Not by itself. But put it together with the consolation I get from knowing that God has a plan. Make it concrete by thinking about the cross. I pray and let God restore me mostly every day. And the people of God give me a pretty good boost just about every Sunday.”

“I guess it must be good to be a believer.” I’m still not sure if this was a statement or a question. In any case, he took it as a question.

“Don’t think of it something so strange,” he said. “Believing is just seeing what to those who look is basically obvious. Are we here from nothing? Were we made for nothing? Are we here for nothing? And look at the fact that so much that makes us is not of our choosing, could it be that God just lets this be decided by luck?”

I remember this well because I had never thought about such things before. Certainly I had never talked to anyone who seemed so normal and so sure at the same time. He was sure but he didn’t seem too eager to “get” me. Quite calmly he referred me to the website at the bottom of the Preamble. “Life with God is great.” This was all he had to add.

I myself don’t have much more to add. I did a little homework, talked to a couple of people, and found that faith makes sense and responded to the deepest hopes within me. I found that even the most traditional stuff is beautiful when you see what it is trying to say. I found that I could talk to God, and when I did, God talked back.

I hope that this letter has satisfied your interest. If not, I’m not sure what we can do. I’m leaving for the missions in two days.

A downloadable copy of “A Preamble to the Life of Faith” is available from The Faith Kit at www.thefaithkit.org.

A Preamble to the Life of Faith

We, the children of an all-good God, take it as quite evident that we were made for life, life with God forever.

We understand that we are here solely to prepare for life with God, and that this we do by growing in faith and love, and helping others to do the same.

We recognize that in every little way we grow, we give God vastly more to work with once we die, and the fruits of our transformation are infinite since they will go on and on forever.

We recognize that in every little way we help others to grow, they will have more to share with our whole human family, so that the value of every act of goodness is multiplied by every person who will ever live.

We understand that every moment we give God, and every act of kindness or sacrifice for another person, will make us grow at least a little, every time, even if no one but God notices.

This, then, is the grand purpose of life, and we are resolved to pursue it, and to know the satisfaction that is possible only when we are doing with life what life is for.

Dear Theophilus VII

Dear Theophilus,

First of all, thank you for reading my book, and taking the time to write me about it. I think that I understand your questions—if not to say your doubts—and I will try to address them in the order that you presented them.

To speak of the basics as faith in Heaven, Love, and God's Plan is indeed simple, but this was my goal. I say this not only because we live in a world with a weak attention-span, but also because it seems to me obvious that the truth about God should be blessedly simple—isn't this what we expect from breakthroughs in physics?—and isn't it right that God would design it so that the same faith could be seen and professed by all His people regardless of their education or experience?

Isn't there something a little breathtaking in this simple trinity of ideas which, with help from the idea that We Were Made to Be a Family, explain our life so completely in a way that is so uplifting? (And where else have you ever heard the gifts of faith explained such that the explanation gives the gift?)

The ideas may be simple, but they are not mundane. It is radically *not* worldly to live for life with God, to recognize that this life is preparation, *not* the life that we were made for. Love even unto giving up your one life here is radically not worldly. And unqualified faith in God's plan *no matter what has happened...* well, this is hardly ever in the hearts even of those who pray for things. And please notice, the book contains numerous reflections that might help you to answer the question, Why would God plan that? in a way that respects the implications of the fact that God is God, and this means good and necessarily behind all things, and we are here for some essential reason involving our own struggles and choices! Have you seen in bigger books, that use bigger words, a more direct treatment of the real issues than this?

With regard to the idea that you can believe just by looking at the alternatives, after I have “in such a leading way formulated the questions,” I would say this: By presenting the essential issues (the universe comes from

something greater than itself, or it doesn't, etc.), I have, I think, helped us to clarify the truth built into our human nature—which was exactly the promise of my book. I think my point is well-taken: So many people now preach at us, and they say different things, with their own jargon, and their own agenda.... The question as to whether we can trust human nature is a philosophical one that could not be treated fully in a book on spirituality—but perhaps you would be willing to read my theology!

Finally, let me respond to your concern that my book is asking to “buy a whole detailed philosophy of life that excludes others, including [your] own.” I feel bad that people sometimes think this. In my writings I am trying to be complete, and clear and consistent in my terms. But I can see how this can come across as “exclusive.” Please know that I know the truth about truth: No one sees it completely; everyone sees something; all of us have something to contribute. (Is this not my description of heaven, and the reason that we were made to be a family?) I myself continue to profit from the contributions of many people's ideas; and I find that there is a place for them in my mind, in or alongside my own ideas. Now, I realize that the ideas I have offered you in my book are big ideas, that would necessarily affect how you look at many things, but, hey, that's how they got into a book, and don't we need the clarity and simplicity without which religion will drown in the opinions of the billions of us who now know how to use a pencil?

Please look at it again. Ask yourself, Does this make sense? Receive the gifts of faith. Is there really anything better?

Thank you, again, for reading this letter.

Sincerely,

Father Bob

To read more about Father Bob's books, just go to www.thefaithkit.org.

Dear Theophilus VIII

Dear Theophilus,

I knew that when I told my story at church there would be some kind of fallout, and your letter to me, I guess, was it. Nonetheless, if I was willing to tell my story in person, I can tell my story on paper for the benefit of whomever it might help.

The news came as the shock of my life. And it didn't even come from him. I had seen the signs—his indifference, the odd hours and lame excuses, the missing money—and then I saw *them* where they ought not to be, as they ought not to be.

When I confronted him, he responded with anger—almost threatening anger—and lies. As I ticked off the evidence, he started to leave but by the time he got to the door I had said enough that he knew he had no where to go. He just sat down and let me scream.

I had a lot to scream about. *I*, after all, had been faithful. We had two kids. I had also worked, and taken care of him, and put up with him, and his family too. He was a “monster,” I told him, and plenty more. And it was becoming more and more difficult to look at him, and so now I wanted him out.

He did go; I did not know where, and he did not call for two days. I was tempted to call everyone I knew but I did not, and therefore I was doubly angry when I found out that he had been talking to his family.

I was very angry. I was hurt. I was scared. I was confused. The “idiot” said he was confused too and did not know how he felt. When I heard this I only wanted to talk about divorce, and he said that I should do whatever I wanted.

I hung up on him, but did nothing in the direction of divorce.

Over the next couple of weeks, he came by to get things and see the kids. At one point I told him coldly that I needed money, and the next time

he came he left money. So it went. Finally, one particular Friday night, he came a little later than expected. The kids were already in bed. For this reason I didn't want to let him in, and asked him right away, "what are you doing here? What do you want?" "Forgive, me," he said. "I don't want to lose you; I don't want to lose my family." "You should have thought of that before..." I said. "Please," he replied, "I didn't realize how much you mean to me, and now I know, and I swear I'll never... I'll always... I'll change...."

Thus started the conversation that was always inevitable. I wanted to know how this happened. He didn't give enough details. I insisted. He told how, "for a while, now" he didn't feel appreciated. He told how this other person, whose name he would never say, gave him attention, and listened to him, and laughed at his jokes, and thought he was smart. I wanted to know if he thought this was an excuse for what he had done and he said no. I wanted him to know that I hadn't felt appreciated either but never thought that this was a reason to betray him—to BE-TRAY him. He said he "knew" but it was not clear what he knew.

Now the conversation moved on to the other person. I made him say her name. (This did not appear easy.) I wanted other details as well, but he would answer only in a general way. He did confess that he had been "completely" unfaithful. This made me cry—even though I had known it.

And now I wanted time.

But time for what? I had come to realize that there was still love, but there was so much hurt. So much hurt. How do you forgive a person who has humiliated your love so completely? How do you get past the images, the images of him with her in so many poses? How do you let him near you knowing that he has memories of her in his mind?

In the end, the problem turned out to be the solution. I looked at things through his mind, at least I tried to. I tried to see his frustrations, the ones he talked about, and also the temptations he tried not to talk about. I saw the human man I married, and how I had always noticed that he thought he had something to prove. I saw through his eyes the allure of attention, and it helped that I had often felt this too. I saw a man who didn't know nearly as much about life as he once thought, and I thought about how what you *don't* know can be deadly. And I started to see that this man now knew a little

more, about life, about love, and about me. I told myself that his memories would fade, but he would never forget the lessons he had learned. I asked him to show that he had learned, in doing this, not doing that, and in thinking of things all by himself.

I told him that I expected him to be patient, that I would need time; and he said that he would, and he was, and he needed to be.

I was thinking of all the right things but still it was hard. I suffered attacks of anger and of sadness. Sometimes I thought I would never get past it. Many times I wanted to go back over everything, and he said that doing this was killing us, and, most of the time, I saw that this was true.

God saved our marriage. In looking for a reason to love, I used as a motive that I was loved. For the first time in such a deep way, I accepted the love that was coming to me from God in waves, for the very human person that I was, even though I had sometimes cheated “in my heart,” and committed sins against people too. I was loved for who I actually was; this was holy and therefore hard; and it was the purpose of life and proof that I had faith.

Slowly I healed because I was open to it. *He* grew because so many obstacles, especially pride, had been broken down. Eventually we learned how to talk about things, but not too much. And because we said what we needed to hear, we had a base to build on. We started having happy moments. A new bond began to build. Two years later we were happy. And we are happy still.

I hope my story will help someone else.

Theophilus IX

Dear Theophilus,

No, you have not offended me by asking me to recount my story. I have told my story in the hope that it would help others, and I have no problem in telling it in writing to you.

In my own mind, I call my story “the conversion of the righteous man.” Perhaps this is a bit presumptuous; I was certainly righteous; but only God can say if I am really converted!

I was certainly righteous. I was raised for it. Our parents were strict, and they themselves were good. We never saw a serious sin, and when we heard about the bad things that people do, we were more than just a little disgusted. It was also clear that the sinner (forgivable though he may be) was in some way inferior. I learned early that I did not want to be inferior. I felt that I was quite the opposite.

Life did not dissuade me much. I was good. I was no angel but I never got in serious trouble. I did well in school, spent myself on good clean fun, and I was never nasty, not even to the DORKs and losers.

When I got older I did not get drunk and did not do drugs. (Actually, I hardly went to parties because bad things happened at parties.) I liked girls at least as much as the next guy, and I had some really pretty friends, but I did not try to have sex, and I never even said I did. Once, one of my friends let me know she was really ready but I told her that it was wrong, and I felt really right saying this.

I felt—we felt—really right about not having sex during our courtship, and I think that this was really good for us just the way it is supposed to be.

We prayed together and went to church.

We gave our kids a sincere good example.

We were the perfect couple, we thought. For sure we were a very good couple.

There was nothing going wrong in our marriage when the trouble started. It started so simply—with me hiring the prettiest applicant for the job as my new secretary even though she was only second or third in terms of qualifications.

To this day I do not believe that she was out to break up my marriage. I think she just sort of fell for me because I was “good” and not like other guys. She started to say things and instead of stopping her I just lapped it up. I guess after twelve years of marriage it was nice to have somebody—somebody really pretty—interested in me. This is certainly part of it; the other part had nothing to do with the twelve years; it’s just that I found it impossible to resist the attention.

One thing led to another. Eventually, it became obvious that my involvement with her was a violation of my marriage—that could cost me my marriage.

What was I thinking? I ask myself still. My only answer: I was not thinking. My inability to face my conscience made me unconscious of the truth. When, from time to time things would happen and the truth was thrust into my face, I put it off by telling myself that “I’ll deal with this later,” “it’s just a human thing,” “somehow I’ll work it out.”

The truth is: I was stuck. I couldn’t let go, but as far as I was concerned, I still loved my wife. And when we were together I somehow felt love *and no remorse*.

This went on for a while. For a while, I thought that I might be able to keep things as they were forever. Finally I got caught—no one thing happened; it was just volume. I tried to deny it but when she trapped me in yet another lie I just got quiet. She screamed and cried and I wanted to do something to help her.... I wanted to hold her, but that was out of the question.

Her screams and tears woke me up. I swore that it was all nothing to me, and that I would never again do anything to jeopardize our marriage. I swore I would go for help. I would do anything she said.

I guess my problem was that this righteous guy had married a righteous girl. My sin was too terrible for her to bear.

And then I had to tell my parents. I had to tell them. I needed a place to stay.

They didn't yell. I wish they had. It would have been better than the look on their faces.

This, of course, was the crisis of my life. All my life I had been good. Being good was my ID. Now, worse than a hypocrite, I was nothing... and I was marked... and that was it.... I couldn't undo it, ever... forever I would be a failure....

Oh, I will admit that once in a while during that first month, some part of me rebelled with anger. I got mad at life, mad at God even, for setting me up, for making me weak. For a moment or two I was the victim.

But that didn't last.

What did last was the sick feeling that I was now no one.

I wanted to talk about this with someone, anyone, but I was always too ashamed. Amazingly to me, somebody at work left a pamphlet on "Repentance" on my desk. I guess the rumor mill had gotten the story— exactly my worst fear. Nonetheless, I read the thing and it said that we are all sinners and the only really righteous thing we can do is admit it and accept that Jesus died to pay our debt. I had heard about this before. But even though I was now a "sinner" it still made no sense to me. I guess I figured if everybody's a sinner, nobody is. I mean, How does God judge us for struggling with the nature He let us be born with?

The truth is: I wasn't afraid of God. I basically always believed in the love of God. I never believed that God would hurt me, not in hell. The problem was: I believed in the love of God but I didn't think of it as a reason to believe in myself. Like people do, I guess, I looked to others for my idea of myself; and I learned that the best way to feel good about yourself is to feel better than others. I guess I thought that if I was *just* like others this meant I was ordinary, not special, not somebody.

Now I was *not* better, and there was nothing I could do to become better. Thus it was that for the first time in my life I was freed to take seriously what I had heard preached to me all my life (remember I was not a person who ever missed church!): God loves you for who He made you. You are who He made you through His plan for your life. And He has put His whole self into making you you and no less than He has put into the making of anyone else.

This was a start. Then I started remembering more. I remembered that God forgives us because He knows the struggles He has given us. And He gives us struggles in order to make us into the person He wants us to be in heaven.

I remembered that when we learn from our mistakes we turn a bad thing into a good thing, and that we are more, not less, because of what has happened.

I remembered that the greatest thing we can do is to accept ourselves for who God has made us, and to accept the struggles that He sends us according to His plan.

This was hard, but the fact that it was hard helped me to realize it was great.

Then I went to church, to make a confession. The priest told me that when you mess up what God wants is wisdom and compassion. He wants wisdom about human nature, and how anyone can go wrong in the right circumstances. And He wants compassion for others who maybe haven't yet learned what was given to you.

As you can see, Theophilus, my crisis taught me a lot. I confessed to my family and was open with my friends. I felt free and whole as I had never before.

I tried to confess to the one person I had hurt most but she would not hear it. I was even hoping that we might be able to work through things and make a new start. You see, now that I had learned to love myself, I was even more sure of my love for her. But it seems that God is asking me to accept that what I hope is not to be.

I am trying to accept this because I believe in God, and now I believe in me.

I hope that what God has done with me will help others to believe in themselves for who they really are.

Thank you for wanting to hear my story.

Theophilus X

Dear Theophilus,

I wonder how many times you have received an unsolicited letter, but I heard about your ministry and I thought I would send you this story. It is a conversion story, but of whom? You be the judge.

I am a prison chaplain and this is a story of something that happened at State Prison.

A new inmate came to the chapel. He was a hard guy. Now, please understand, I am not talking about the local bully across your suburban street at Bluebonnet Junior High School. No, this was a hard guy. He was scarred, tattooed with symbols of violence, and showed the signs of a man who had been beaten, by others and by life. Even the other guys seemed scared of him.

He sat himself in the back row, looked very angry, spoke to no one, and did not participate in any visible way. I wondered why he had even come to chapel—which is never mandatory—and I figured that he didn't realize what he had gotten into and now it was too late to go back. Still, in no way did he disrupt Mass, so there was no reason to do anything about him.

What I did do was what I had planned: I opened a series on self-love for the right reason, “because God through His plan, has made us who we are so far...”

The next week he came back, sat in the same seat, still looked really angry, and did not participate again. This time I knew that he knew what he was getting into and so... why did he come if he was going to sit there like that?!

Once again, his presence did not affect my message. “God, because He is God, and because He is infinite, puts infinite attention and love into everything He does, and this means into His plan for you, and this means no less than He has put into His plan for anyone else... and it does not matter

whether the world can see what He is doing to get you ready to be the irreplaceable person you will be in our family in heaven....”

The next week he came back again, and this time he was sitting a little closer to the front. And, now I noticed, he stood when they stood, and sat only when they sat.

The next he came back, and now he was sitting closer.

The next he came back, and now he was sitting even closer to the front.

The following week he was in the front row, albeit at the far end. Now I noticed that he made the sign of the cross when it was called for, and seemed to say “amen.”

Seven days later he was back. Now he was sitting right in front of me. I could see that he was paying attention. What he heard was my message on the meaning of communion, that “communion presents to us a sign of the very same love that God wanted to proclaim to us on the cross, where God was trying to say what we’ve been talking about, that ‘I love you with all I have because I have put all I have into making you who you are....’”

And when it was time for communion guess who got on the line and prepared himself to receive communion as he had seen the others do it!?

This story is not over.

After communion, as usual, the inmates sing a communion song. They pick it themselves, and this week they picked a long one. They started singing, and at some point during the first verse, this hard guy started flipping through the pages of the missalette he had been holding all along; he was looking for the song. What I saw next I will never forget. He found the song, looked for while at the words; and then, ever so slightly, he started to tremble. No one else noticed this, but I did, and as I was still watching, now I saw his lips, ever so slightly, start to move. He didn’t make much noise, but he was trying to sing, trying to sing to God in thanksgiving for His love. I very much doubt that he had ever tried to sing in presence of people before—at least not as an adult.

This was certainly one of the most beautiful things I had ever seen.

And then I asked myself, “if this guy, who had obviously been through so many hard things, and was now in prison, could make himself so vulnerable in order to thank God for His love, what excuse to do have for NOT doing it?! If he could thank God for *his* life, how could I not thank God for *mine*? If he could do something so difficult for him in order to show his gratitude, what should be too much for me?

I am still working on my answer to these questions.

If you interested, I will let you know how it goes.

Theophilus XI

Dear Theophilus,

You have asked me to write the story of how I came to join the Church. I will begin by telling you that in the eyes of many in my family, this is the story of how I lost my “Christian” faith.

I was brought up on the Bible, in a Bible-based church. The faith we shared was beautiful in many ways I still appreciate. It was all there in the Bible. It was simple. It was all about God and getting saved; and I got saved when I was eleven. It was not hard to admit that I was a sinner, and to accept that Jesus died to take my punishment.

Things started to breakdown in high school. It was the typical thing—evolution. In retrospect, I wonder why Bible Christians dig in so deep on this issue. After all, to say that Genesis was a story meant to teach the fact of creation, and not to provide science or history, in no way threatens the idea that the Bible is true about the things we need to know, and it would not set up the Bible as a easy target for the overwhelming evidence of science and reason itself. Nonetheless, this is the way they taught us, and it set me up to think that the foundation of my faith was shaky.

Since the foundation of my faith was shaky, my faith now shook whenever it was challenged, whenever somebody didn’t believe something I thought was important, or, more importantly, whenever I was tempted to do something that the Bible told me not to.

Then I confronted the essence for real—the idea of salvation. Finally I put it together. If it was a big deal that I was saved, this meant that other people weren’t, many other people. And *this* meant that they were damned, damned to hell, damned to hell forever, forever!

As I got older, and I got to know more and more people who were damned, this started to get to me. I said to myself, “if God is so good... I mean even *you* wouldn’t be damning just about everybody... isn’t God a nicer guy than you?”

Of course, I still believed in God, and still believed that there was right and wrong, and that it was important to do right and not wrong. This left me a bit perplexed. Actually, it left me quite unhappy because unanswered questions like these make it hard to believe in anything and to get the peace and sense of purpose that people get from faith.

I was no angel but I knew I didn't want to live *and die* like the typical modern believer in nothing. Besides that, if someone said, What are you? I wanted to be able to say what I was and have it mean something.

I started to talk about this kind of stuff with different people including this guy from work named Kirk who said he had become a Catholic—that he wasn't born one but actually chose it.

I had heard about Roman Catholics, we always called them “Roman” Catholics, as I grew up and what we heard was not too good. We heard that these popes had basically hijacked the Church, took the Bible away from the people, and put in its place a bunch of made-up doctrines that made them more powerful. I mean it was obvious: You couldn't get to heaven without obeying them, and passing through all kind of ceremonies that only they could do. (The thing about Mary I didn't get at all, but it was still obvious that you shouldn't be praying to people, you should only pray to God.) With these kinds of ideas in my mind, I was pretty defensive when this Kirk tells me that the Church has confronted the salvation problem and come up with a bigger, deeper way of understanding what Jesus came to teach us.

Kirk said that the problem first showed up when we figured out that the earth is round. Think about it: If Adam and Eve had never sinned, and no one ever died, the world would have filled up with people a long time ago. He said that this made us think of heaven as a different place, and raised the question, What are we doing here on earth? He said that to answer this question we should look at what we actually do: We grow. Ideally we grow in faith and love, the faith and love that makes us more like God and prepares us to share His life more richly. I said, “why would we need to do that?” and he said, “because, this way, we are involved in our own creation, and we have something to say about who we will be in heaven. That's another gift that God is giving us,” he said. I said, “what about people who don't do it?” and he said, “nobody doesn't do it. People do the best they can with what God sends them.” He said that faith has always known that God is behind everything. But we always tried to make exceptions when bad things

happen or people do bad things. But this was a fudge. “Now,” Kirk said, “we see the big picture. God *is* behind everything just like we thought. He sends things into our lives knowing how we will respond and this way He gets us to be the person He wants us to be and we still get to be involved.” I asked him how this can be since there are such big differences in the goodness of the lives that God gives people. He said something that changed my outlook on everything.

Kirk said, “salvation isn’t about me saving me; it’s about us saving us.” He said that God wanted us to be a family with Him in heaven, a family of people who are connected to get each other, a family of people who owe each other for who they are, a family of people who love each other. He said that in heaven we are going to be together and everyone is going to share with everybody else what each one sees in God. This way, everyone will have all there is. It is the only way that everyone will have all there is because, as you can see when you look at all that God has made, God is more than what one person can know by himself.

Kirk said that this idea, that we were made to be a family, explains the fact that all of us owe history, and generations of primitive people, for everything we have and we are. He said that it upholds the goodness of God’s plan when terrible things happen that we could never make sense of any other way.

He said that because we were made to be a family God wants us to be a family, at least in faith, here on earth; and this is the Church.

He said that Jesus was sent to start the Church because if God really wants us to be a family in faith He had to send somebody who could speak in His name.

Kirk gave me this. He said it was called “A Practical Creed”:

God made us for life in heaven.

The way to heaven is a life of faith and love.

God guides us according to His plan for everything He sends into our lives.

We are going to share heaven as a family where all of us are going to be richer for the holiness of each of us.

Jesus was sent to teach the truth, to found the Church, and to accept the cross on which he taught and showed us love.

The Eucharist is the meal we share to be God's family, and it is also God's way to show us again and again the love He showed us first on the cross.

The rest of the life of Jesus was planned to show us that faith can conquer any adversity.

Kirk said that I should think about it and if I had more questions I should see his friend Father Mike at his church.

Well I did have more questions and I did see Father Mike.

We talked about the popes, and Father Mike said that if you are going to be a community you need leaders, and if you are going to be one family of faith around the world, you need one person to hold it together, and Jesus picked Saint Peter for this purpose, and the popes are the people who followed Saint Peter. Father Mike said that by establishing official leadership Jesus made it possible for his teachings to be made deeper as humanity grows up and we look at things in deeper ways. He said "infallibility" doesn't mean that the popes do everything perfect; it just means that God's plan won't let the rightful leaders of the Church mess up its destiny. He said that infallibility doesn't mean that the Church got everything perfectly right—he said that the Church didn't *anything* perfect right—but that it was doing the best it could for the times, and passing on to us a certain "essence" that we can come to understand better and better as we as God's family grow up.

He said that sacraments are sacred actions, actions that speak for God that God gave the Church because there are some things you cannot say with words alone.

He said that Mary is important because she is our main example of someone who accepted hard things she did not understand.

We talked a lot about the Eucharist, and Father Mike gave me a Catechism to read, and he said that I should come to church and see how it was.

I did go, and it was not weird at all. I understood what was going on and it all made sense and it was a richer kind of ceremony than I had been to before.

I kept going and Father Mike kept saying little things about the meanings of communion during the Mass, and it got to the point where I really wanted to receive communion myself.

I talked to Father Mike about it and he referred to the practical creed and he asked me if I knew of a better explanation of life than that. I said no. He asked me if I had been studying my catechism so I could see why the Church believed these things and I said yes. He asked me if the whole thing made sense to me and I guess it should have been a bigger deal to say it but really it was very easy to say yes to this too. Now he said, “So if you see all this you realize that God wants you to be part of the Church.” “I guess so,” I said. And he said, “Guess?”

I was confirmed as a adult member of the Church within the month and received communion for the first time.

For me, it turned out to be natural and easy even though my family didn't want to hear about any of it—not my questions, not the Church's answers, and definitely not about me joining.

I don't know if you consider this a real conversion story but this is what I have.

To read more about Kirk and Father Mike, just go back to www.thefaithkit.org/panorama and download “Kirk: a spiritual adventure in three acts.”

Theophilus XII

Dear Theophilus,

May peace be upon you.

When first I received your letter, I was not inclined to respond. For someone in the Islamic tradition to profess Christianity is a very serious matter, and it has been hard enough on my family without me putting things in writing. Nonetheless, I accept what I have learned—that God gives you faith in order for you to share it, and so this is what I will attempt to do.

We were a moderate Islamic family even before we moved to the West. We professed that “there is no God but Allah, and Mohammed is His prophet,” and we kept Ramadan; but we did nothing special on Fridays, and my father drank beer.

I thought little about religion for most of my life. When I was young I thought about fun; and when I got older I thought about money. I am not unintelligent and I did well in schools and became well-employed. It was now time for me to marry but I was enjoying my life making and spending money, and so I, as you say, dragged my feet.

What happened next were three movements within me. First I began to be dissatisfied with making and spending money. Such a life began to seem to me empty. Then I began to question life itself: What is its purpose? And what about death? Of course, I had been taught about paradise; but, now, in my modern eyes, this began to look like a fairy tale, the pathetic hope of ignorant people with nothing else to hope for. But what, then, should I myself hope for? What should be the purpose of anybody’s life? These questions led to a third movement within me—the great awareness that the world was filled with different beliefs, all of which were assured by “faith.” Now I needed more; I needed reasons to believe.

It was during this time that I read in the newspaper about a “Bold Christian Address to Moslems.” Reprinted in that article was the letter “Dear brothers and sister, children of Allah, Father of us all” which I have included with my letter to you.

As, perhaps, you can see, this letter seemed to address my concerns. The newspaper article that reported it went on to say that a website had been set up where one might read more. In the privacy of my home I did just that. The opening page of that website led me to “We Catholics” which I also include with my letter. I was then offered the opportunity to click through an on-line “Short Course in Christianity” with the additional opportunity of an e-mail address where I might send any questions.

In short, I began this course and sent my questions. They were answered promptly and openly, and when I had a follow-up question, these were answered too. I began an e-mail conversation with a deacon who was Arab, originally from Egypt, and things progressed to the point where he suggested that I experience a Mass. He gave me addresses and times for both a Eastern style Mass such was attended my many Arabic speaking people, and a Roman style Mass which was quite near my home.

In time I tried both and found the Roman style Mass to be easier to understand. I went back. A couple of weeks later I went back again. Somehow this Mass was becoming part of my life.

When finally I talked to the priest about becoming a Christian he invited me to come for a conversation. I was quickly made comfortable, and even more so when I discovered that he spoke to me in the same plain terms I had read about on-line. We talked a lot about history, and the grand plan of God, and role of different religions, and how none of this diminished the importance of an individual’s decisions.

I made my decision. I decided to take a stand with my life. I took the stand that made most sense to me, embracing the faith that offered me the most beautiful concept of God I had heard and answered all my questions openly as it promised it would.

I have been very happy in this decision.

“Dear brothers and sister, children of Allah, Father of us all” and “We Catholics” are also available at www.thefaithkit.org/panorama. Go to the

Mini-Books menu and for the former click on “Four Letters” and for the latter “Seven Statements of Faith.”

The “Short Course in Christianity” was suggested by “Level I” of this author’s *A Complete Course in Christianity*. If you would like to have some idea of the contents of this book, just go back to www.thefaithkit.org/panorama, click on “Kirk: a spiritual adventure in three acts,” and download “Kirk’s Course of Study.”

Brothers and sisters, children of Allah, Father of us all,

First of all, thank you for being willing to read this letter.

We wish to begin by acknowledging that we see much truth in Islam. You are sure and you are right that God is one, and, historically, you have been even more sure than we have that God is God and behind all things.

We also praise Mohammed for the beautiful simplicity of his teaching of a way of salvation that was good for people and could be followed by everyone who heard it, so all God's people could feel that they could find their way to Him. And we praise the tradition of Islam for its insistence on justice, mercy, generosity, and wise living.

But we ask you to consider this: As Islam has its genius in making things simple, Western religion has tried to tackle the complexity of things. We have tried to answer fair questions about God, His ultimate responsibility for everything, His boundless goodness, and the "why" of the human struggle here on earth.

Please do notice that our answers are as deep as the questions are fair. Please notice that we have made sense of everything by coming to see that all of us are one family. Please understand that we owe all this to Jesus, whose life, death, and "resurrection"—this means his appearance after his death—give the human family what it needs in order to be a family in faith.

We understand that the phrase "Son of God" seems to you sacrilegious, and more than is called for by the facts. But please take notice: All of us are God's children—made in His image, and made of His love. If indeed Jesus was sent to make this known, he is rightly called the Son of God.

Of course, we acknowledge that God's plan also sent the Prophet, and certainly he had an essential role to play in the spiritual journey of the original Islamic peoples. To our way of thinking, he was your Moses.

But, in Jesus, God was calling the Jews, and He is also calling you to continue the journey. None of your unique wisdom needs to be denied. We need but to agree that "life is growth" and growth is meant to make us one.

We Catholics

We Catholics recognize that there is truth in the sincere opinion of everyone, and in the teachings of other religions, but we believe that God wants humanity to become one family in faith, and that He, through Jesus, established our Church for this purpose. Among the reasons we believe this: The Church alone has maintained from the time of Jesus the traditions and structures that are needed if indeed humanity is to be and function as one family in faith, and if our understanding of the truth is to grow as we do.

And there are other reasons we want to share with you our faith: Catholic Christian faith is:

- Simple. Though it offers a comprehensive explanation of life in terms of nothing more than heaven, love, and God's plan, it is still open-ended in the sense that it can respond to good questions at ever deeper levels right down to the inexplicable fact that God always was.
- Positive. Not only does it describe God and creation in terms that are unambiguously good, it offers every believer the gifts of faith, particularly peace, purpose, and joy, and nothing that should scare or sadden a person's spirit. Also, it is never a faith that needs to be explained in terms of who we are *not* and what we do *not* believe.
- Apologetic. It is a faith which can be explained so that a person can see it for him or herself. At no point does it require a person to submit to some-thing (or person, or book) *you just have to believe*.

Dear You

Dear you,

It is my presumption that you are already familiar with my avocation. I am a collector of the spiritual stories of people who have them.

I find that I am very uplifted by hearing about the struggles and discoveries of people, especially those who come to discover that faith is everything.

I find that I learn, not just from the struggles of people, but also from their specific discoveries. Actually, this is what faith has taught me to expect. After all, this is how it should be if all of us were made different so that one day all of us will see God differently and gain something to share with the rest of our family that they would never get any other way.

It is on this basis that I am writing to you.

Please understand, I don't need to hear about some great change or accomplishment in your life. I don't need to know about some great burden you have borne. I just need to know how you became a person of faith.

You were not born with faith. Undoubtedly you once had childish ideas of many things. Maybe you were once a disbeliever, or at least a big doubter. But now you have faith. How did this happen?

If you are willing to share your story with me, I would like to hear it.

Was your faith the result of a discovery or change of mind?

Was it the product of some sort of suffering?

Is it owed to another person? (What did he or she do for you?)

Were there obstacles to believing you had to overcome? (How did this happen?)

I am also interested to know what, exactly, you believe and why—if you can say. What do you believe about God, the purpose of life on earth, death, why things happen, right and wrong?

Do you experience God? (What is this like?)

What does faith do for you?

What would life be like without it?

What, if anything, do you do to take care of your faith and maybe even make it grow?

If you share your faith, how? What do you say?

Please share your faith with me.

Thanking you in advance, hoping one day to call you a friend, I am,

Sincerely yours,

Theophilus

About Theophilus

Theophilus was born a middle child in a nuclear family with a home in a suburb of a modern, Western city.

His parents were educated, mature believers, active in church.

Theophilus was raised in a manner similar to the approach to parenting described in the first letter to him.

He was sometimes bad, but not too bad, and sometimes prayed but not too much.

He was good at play and less good at school.

He liked girls before he knew it, and it took him a while to understand his feelings and not be driven by them to act goofy.

When first he thought about his future, his expectations were unrealistic, and at first it hurt when he had to accept that he was not to be a star on all (or any) of his big-league hometown teams.

He had to grow into the idea that a great life was something having nothing to do with television.

He also had to grow into disinterest in television—though his parents made this easier by not allowing him to become addicted.

It took him a while but grew into the idea that “faith is its own reward,” and therefore sinners are already punished, and there is no reason to wish them to hell.

It was a little harder to understand why Jesus seemed to be preaching hell, but he easily understood the idea of using stories to make points—were not the parables stories?—and eventually he grasped the concept that people at different ages, and ages in history, were less able to understand deep things and needed more black and white ways of making sense of things.

In the area of morals he had to move in the direction of grays. At first he thought that the divorced parents of a friend were therefore bad people. With the aid of a few mistakes of his own, he learned not just shades of gray but also compassion.

As a child he found that obedience was easier than love.

As a child he found forgiveness easy; but when he got older his ego got involved and forgiveness got harder. Only by doing it did he learn to let things go, in terms of both forgiveness and sacrifice.

Actually, he had to learn to let lots of things go. He struggled with a desire not to let the past be past but he eventually learned to see his experiences as a treasury of glimpses into the never-ending world to come.

He had a hard time leaving home but adjusted fairly quickly.

Falling in love turned out to be easy. Being in love was not. He had some difficult moments dealing with jealousy, and it turned out that he had to learn a lot more love for himself in order to love someone else well.

He had to learn to love himself in stages. First he thought he was good when he thought that he was better (at baseball, etc.). It was upsetting to him when this broke down (because he was not better than everyone). He had to pass through a phase of being good because people liked him. But pleasing others soon proved too burdensome—and sometimes “too stupid,” he thought—to care about. Believing in himself because God, through His plan, had made him who he was was hard. It happened only when he came to realize that there was greatness in accepting God’s decisions for who he was *not* and never on earth would be.

The idea that, in creating, God had put into action a plan, was not at all difficult to understand. It took longer to understand how God’s plan worked *through* our decisions and actions leaving us free and giving us motive to do our best. He understood the idea that we are here to “become our own person” better and better as it became more and more important to him to be his own person.

Since it was explained to him from the start—and since he himself was from a family where it was all for one and one for all—the idea that we

are here to become the *family* we will be in heaven made sense, and it definitely made sense of the hard things that happened according to God's plan, especially in the news.

Growth in faith in God's plan became a constant in his spiritual story. It was this that gave him the idea that his life was a unique and important spiritual journey, and that God was speaking through it—to him for sure and maybe to others.

In time, it occurred to him that if his story could speak to others, maybe others' stories could speak to him.

It was this that led to his avocation.

The Continuing Adventures of Stephen: An Addendum

His last memory of life on earth was of pressure upon him from all sides. The next moment he opened his eyes in heaven and his first words were “So that was it.”

There was God. And God was beautiful. And God was great. So great. But not scary. But, instead, utterly good and happy to see him.

God was love, and God was land—the land he now lived on. God’s love was vast and so was the land, and so were all the riches of it, and Stephen could see no end to it.

But he clearly saw the truth—the truth of everything, and his life too. It was so simple, and deep, and wonderful.

He saw history at a glance, and how it turned out, and why it had to go the way it did.

He was embraced by Jesus, whose true story was now known to him in every detail. He found that some things were exactly as he had always pictured them, and that others were very different.

He laughed with his parents, whose life after his death was already known to him, and he understood why they now thanked God for all they had gone through—he could see all they had gained through it.

He was very pleased to know Theophilus, now his brother and beloved friend.

All God’s family were known and beloved to him. Though he had been told that this would happen in heaven, he was never able to picture it. Now he knew better what a person is, and so he saw how inevitable this always was.

From the beginning, Stephen noticed that he didn’t have a body like the one he had on earth, but the body he now had was awesome to him, and

powerful. He could see whatever he wanted to see, do whatever he wanted to do, and he was already all he could imagine wanting to be.

He also saw that he was so much richer for being with everyone, all of whom had something of God to share with him. He, of course, was also happy because God had given him so much to share with them. This had made them richer, and they in turn had more to share with him....

Everyone was together with everyone, in a vast variety of intimate and interconnected relationships; God's children were a family; God's children were one—and one with Him.

He was eager to talk to God, and God was eager to talk to him. He asked God, "how can it be that You always existed." And God replied, "it will take you an eternity to find out."

All his powers notwithstanding, Stephen could not express the depth of his joy.