

Acclaimed Atheist Poet Becomes Catholic: 'My Tears Just Stopped'



Poet Sally Read (Ignatius Press/Used with permission) “If you’re there, you have to help me.” Those are the words that poet Sally Read said to an icon of Jesus in 2010. Read, a British poet and atheist, had stopped into a church in Santa Marinella, Italy. She felt burdened. Her young daughter was having health issues. Her husband Fabio was enduring some stress at work. “There was this incredible experience where this presence almost came down, and my tears just stopped, just dried,” Read tells CNSNews.com. “I felt almost physically carried up. It was as if someone walked into the room. I knew this person. I knew that I was a Christian.” Up to that point Read, now 46, had been an atheist. “I was brought up an atheist,” Read notes in her just-published memoir, “Night’s Bright Darkness: A Modern Conversion Story.” “At ten I could tell you that religion was the opiate of the masses; it was [driven] into me to never kneel before anyone or anything...As a young woman I could quote Christopher Hitchens and enough of the Bible to scoff at.”

Read was born in 1971 and raised in Suffolk, England. As a young woman she worked as a nurse in a psychiatric hospital and became a critically acclaimed poet, winning the Eric Gregory Award in 2001. A few years later Read married an Italian man, Fabio, and the couple, along with new daughter Florenzia, moved to Santa Marinella, a town 30 miles from Rome.

In her 30s and raising her daughter, Read began working on a book on women’s health and sexuality. Wanting to interview a wide swath of women for the book, Read contacted orthodox Catholic women. When the women declined to be interviewed, largely due to the graphic nature of Read’s subject matter, Read approached a Byzantine-Catholic priest, Fr. Gregory Hrynkiw, for advice. Fr. Gregory and Read became friends, with the priest answering questions the author had about faith. It was around this time that Read found something fresh in one of her favorite books, “I Capture the Castle.” “The book was written for children, and I read it almost every year,” Read says. “I read the book for comfort. There’s one scene where the protagonist Cassandra, whom I’ve always identified with, has this conversation with this vicar. I never noticed what he said to her - it was about art as being the ultimate attempt at communion with God. It really hit me. It just broke through.” She adds, “In retrospect, I think that God works through things very specifically. It’s no coincidence that that book grew with me.” Then, in 2010, Read had the experience in the church where she felt the presence Christ.

She became more interested in the Catholic Church. “I was passionately in love with Christ, and I knew that I was a Christian. It was a question of ‘What does God want me to do with that?’ I read the Gospels, and I read St. John of the Cross.” Reading Thomas Aquinas, Read says she saw “the logic

behind the love.” She adds, “Running alongside the reading I just felt this presence in Catholic churches. I just knew the best way to get close to Christ was through communion.” In December 2012, Read was received into the Catholic Church at the Vatican. The poet is now working on a novel. She says her new life has made her a better artist. “As a poet from a mostly secular culture, I have come to know the Church as the ultimate poem,” she says. “An intricate composition of allegory and reality, that tries to give image to God’s presence on earth.”

Mark Judge