

Sally Read: Outfoxed by God



For almost all of her 40 years, a Suffolk-born psychiatric nurse-turned published poet and passionate atheist felt little but contempt for Catholicism. But then, in less than a year, after a springtime epiphany she was received into the Church. This is her journey

In the spring of 2010, I embarked on a project with a doctor, co-writing a book about the vagina. It was to be a funky self-help guide to a woman's most misunderstood parts: *The Vagina, an Owner's Guide*. Part of my remit was to garner as much anecdotal information as possible. I decided to interview prostitutes and Muslims, Catholics and lesbians.

The hookers and gay women were easy talkers. The religious women less so. But I live near Rome and run into nuns every day – what a scoop, to talk to a nun about her vagina! But the approach would be tricky. I knew of a priest through a friend, a youngish man who chatted easily at the grocer's. Perhaps he could introduce me to an open-minded sister. One March morning, I emailed him: “Dear Father, I am writing a book about vaginas ...”

And so the clash of the sacred and profane began. He wasn't shocked by the vagina question. But we started talking and, after a lifetime of passionate atheism and a visceral loathing of the Catholic Church, I asked if he minded if I put some questions to him. Sparks flew. Our exchange came to disrupt my work, my sleep, my well-being. Not that the priest's arguments convinced me. Not that I was desperate to convince him. But my mind seemed bent on listening to some painful, raw static I could not switch off from.

I was brought up an atheist. The creed of non-creed was in my blood: Christianity was a symptom of bigotry or feeble-mindedness. I will admit now that as a young woman I had tried to believe in God. I had been to church and Quaker meetings a few times. But by this point in my life I was adamant: there was no God. I remember the dull sadness that came with this realisation, something of the colour grey.

Then, in that insomniac spring, the first epiphany came. It was almost an intellectual leap: the possibility of God. I was in the process of writing, too, a collection of monologues in the voices of psychiatric patients, and in the usual tussle and pain of writerly creation I suddenly understood that my act of creating the voices of these damaged people was linked to an overarching creation. That there could be an ultimate author. The sky seemed to peel off a layer. I was full of a latent happiness I hardly dared interrogate.

“Pray for me,” the priest said, when I told him I was not, after all, an atheist. I didn’t know how to pray; I had never prayed. Nonetheless, each day I stopped off at a little Carmelite church by the sea to sit and listen. I was open to the presence of God, but I was still not Christian – and far from Catholic.

In that church, there was an icon of Christ and, prayerless, I would simply look at him. It was on one of these occasions that I spoke aloud to the face and asked for help. There was no visual or aural hallucination, or anything, as a poet, I can use as a metaphor to tell what happened. The nearest I can come to describing it is to say that it felt like I was an amnesiac in a fit of quiet panic, and suddenly someone walked into the room that I recognised.

Later, I would read Simone Weil’s account of a very similar experience: “Christ lui-même est descendu et m’a prise.” It was unlike anything I had ever experienced and was impossible to replicate internally. I had and have no doubt that it was the presence of Christ. That, earlier in the spring, my breaking apart had allowed God enough of a crack in my intellect and defences to let me know him. Now I was open enough to let Christ embed himself in me.

I was conquered. Whatever I decided to do about entering a church, my devotion to Christ was settled. Nonetheless, the issue of denomination wouldn’t let me alone. I seemed to intuit that there were ways one could get close to Christ on a regular basis.

In the circles I used to keep in London, owning up to choosing to be Catholic is a little like admitting you’re racist or homophobic or sexually repressed. Like most British women these days, I had become

sexually active at about the same time as I learned to drive a car, and with the same pragmatism: “The time is right: I need to get around if I’m not to be left behind.” Chesterton wrote that sex would be the final heresy. Indeed, for me the central stumbling blocks to entering the Church was doctrine relating to homosexuality, masturbation and contraception. I felt I could never belong to a church so didactic in its beliefs, so narrow in its view of sexuality.

At the same time, research for the vagina book was advancing slowly; my appetite for the project was waning, ominously. Memories resurfaced: I remembered one male friend who disliked, intensely, a mutual female friend, calling me one morning to tell me, by the by, he’d slept with her the night before. “But you can’t stand her!” “Oh well, Sal,” he mumbled, “sometimes men are like dogs, you know? You’ve just got to have it.”

I remembered, again, a boyfriend of mine who became incapable of sex because of his addiction to pornography and buggery. I admitted what I’d long known: that sex as recreation was something that depressed me. I had always known it had caused me pain, and I began to know, with splendid relief, that there was nothing abnormal in me.

As a poet, too, I had analysed sexual mores. There are those, Catholic and non-Catholic, who see the explicit nature of my writing about sex as at odds with my new beliefs. But those poems, which investigate violence and sexuality, are hardly a eulogy to the joys of casual sex. Physicality and sexuality have always haunted me; I began to understand that this was because of the inescapable unity of body and soul.

My need for all the senses in experiencing something is apparent in what I write. I came to realise that the smell, the taste, the touch, the sound of God outfoxed the mind. I could rationalise, but all my rationalising couldn’t alter the profound rationality of my encounter with God. They write of intellectual, spiritual, and moral conversions. But it was through the heart – by which I mean the most instinctive, sensitive part, the ultimate reasoning – that God won me.

Yet I still hadn’t fully resolved the issue of denomination, and it obsessed me. On the way home from a visit to London that summer, I tried to find a church to stop in. St Patrick’s in Soho was closed for renovation. Churches around Liverpool Street were being used as art galleries or were only available for private hire. People were drinking out on the streets outside bars, in the early evening heat. I had never felt more hungry. I knew I couldn’t be a Quaker, sitting in a circle, untouched. I knew I couldn’t be a Protestant, pretending a wafer was the body of Christ.

I walked down street after street, feeling, for once, a foreigner in London. There were no churches open. The miracle of finding an open door with a lit candle at the tabernacle was suddenly nothing small. I was already attending Mass in Italy and praying through Communion, often in tears, sometimes simply awed. The most important part of all this, I realised, was being with Christ, was the liturgy itself. I walked for an hour without hope even of a Mass, just wanting to sit by the Blessed Sacrament (I hadn't yet heard of adoration) but every church was closed, or given over to some other denomination or purpose. Eventually I let myself wind up at Liverpool Street station, in all the bright lights and confusion. I knew I was already Catholic.

On 14 December 2010, I was received into the Church in the Vatican.

Coming out as a Catholic hasn't been easy. I understand best those that pick fights with me – how to explain such profound experiences, such a deep love? What surprises me more is envy, a wistfulness that faith has eluded many of my generation. They sense what I can confirm – faith means more love. Becoming Catholic is, of course, a reversion. My great-grandfather was an Orangeman in Northern Ireland. I come from generations of hard-line protestants-turned-atheists. These days, when I pray the Rosary, I find myself wondering which woman was the last in my line to do so, and how easily she gave it up.

It's been said before: being Catholic is like being in love. As a poet from a most secular culture, I have come to know the Church as the ultimate poem. An intricate composition of allegory and reality, that tries to give image to God's presence on earth. The vagina book, by the way, was shelved.

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