

A Recent article in THE TABLET shared the stories of several young people who have just become Catholic – including our own TOLU ARIBA from St John’s who was received at the Easter Vigil.

My spirits sing

In the last of our Easter to Pentecost series of conversion stories, four young people reflect on the journeys that led them to Catholicism

TOLU ARIBA



I WAS RECEIVED into the Catholic Church at the Easter Vigil this year, but I’ve been a Christian all my life. My parents were Pentecostals. The services they took us to in Nigeria, where I was born, had no formal liturgy – they were sort of “free style”, and there was lots of praying in tongues. My parents were both very religious, and my brother and sister and I were woken early in the morning for Bible studies. It was fun.

My secondary school, where I went from 10 to 16, was quite a strict Catholic one. We always said the Angelus at midday. To me, the worship of Mary was very strange, and the incense made me cough. I thought, “this is the twenty-first century. Why are we doing this?” But I loved the hymns. And I loved it that Catholic Masses were much shorter than Pentecostal services, that can go on for hours.

I trained as a doctor in Ukraine. I had some Catholic friends, but I continued to do my Pentecostal thing in a church run by Nigerians. But then in 2017 I met my husband – a Catholic. He explained to me that the Pentecostals and Catholics weren’t so very different: it was just a question of the structure of their worship. We talked about Mary and he explained that, although she was a very special woman, honoured by Catholics, she wasn’t, as I’d thought, the backbone of the Catholic Church. He made me think that our differences weren’t so important as our similarities. Do you think when we get to Heaven there’ll be Catholic sects or Methodist sects or Anglican sects? I don’t think so. God doesn’t talk to us because we come from this sect, or that one, he speaks to us because we’re his children. So it’s we humans who are the problem. God isn’t calling us to a Church, he’s calling us to him. We’re supposed to be one. We are one.

My father and mother went to different churches, because even within the Pentecostal churches their approaches were different. I don’t want my children to grow up in a rift like this, and that is largely why I decided to become a Catholic. I did RCLA [Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults] for 10 weeks, and found the group really supportive, and a good place to ask questions. I loved it that Fr Jock, our parish priest, was always ready to say if there was something he didn’t know, or didn’t understand. He was really good at listening.

Some people wonder how I can have chosen to join a Church that has been clouded by abuse scandals. But I say that there is no organisation without major flaws. It’s only a small percentage of Catholic priests that have gone into such acts, and the same things have happened in the Pentecostal Church.

I have grown to love the structure of Catholic Mass, but there are still things I struggle with – Confession, for example. I feel Confession is something that should be just between myself and God, so I’ve not yet taken the Sacrament of Reconciliation. I’m moving one step at a time. I’m still on my journey. But the greatest change is that I can pray with my husband now: my husband leads the prayer, and then I pray along. I love this.

Tolu Ariba, 30, works in a hospital in Edinburgh.

EDWARD RAMSDEN



MY PARENTS – my father Church of England, my mother Church of Scotland – always took my sisters and me to church when we were small, and faith felt important to me when I was still quite young.

There were a number of people who nurtured this in me: my grandfather, a Church of Scotland minister, had a very strong faith and a love of other people, and was exceptionally kind and caring; and my parish priest at home in Yorkshire, who prepared me for Confirmation, and the chaplain at my boarding school in Wales, really kept the flame burning.

My first visit to a Catholic church was when I was nine. Some friends had come to stay and one of them wanted to go to Mass on Sunday, so I asked if I could keep her company on the drive to Ampleforth.

That Mass was unlike anything I’d encountered before – for example, I’d never come across incense (I whispered to our friend, “What is that?” and when she whispered back “incense” I thought she’d said “insects”: I thought the thurible was full of spiders). But I was moved by the depth of reverence and the feeling of contemplation. Even on that first visit there was a bit of me that was not exactly envious, but I wanted to be a part of it. I wanted to be a part of what those monks were living. A mustard seed was planted that day, and it grew.

Twenty-three years on, in June 2021, just as the world was opening up after Covid, I found myself back at Ampleforth for a memorial service. I watched the congregation, many of them roughly my age, genuflect as they went into their pews. They looked so at home in their faith, and I thought, “Goodness, I want to be a part of this.”

In August last year, I started to have weekly meetings with Fr Edward Corbould, an Ampleforth monk. He is now 90, but he immediately offered to help me. He put no pressure on me. Every week he said: “Make time for prayer, try to go to Mass as often as you can, think about what we’ve talked about and let me know if you’d like to meet again.” He was incredibly generous with his time, but there was also something deeply private about him and I knew I could trust him to be totally discreet. He put me at my ease completely.

I was really sure I wanted to go ahead from our first meeting. We went through the main differences between the Catholic faith and the Church of England – for example, that Catholics believe that the Eucharist really is the body and blood of Christ – and he explained that my mother wouldn’t be able to receive Communion in the Catholic Church with me. He did this very kindly: he has a very gentle presence, and I had a real feeling of his representing Christ on Earth.

At every meeting, Fr Edward said, “Just remember that you are loved by God”: such an amazing thing to say, and such a lovely thing to know. And I knew he really, really believed it. And when I was received, on 11 February this year, he suggested we have a reading from the Letter of St Paul to the Romans 8:38–39. It ends:

“For I am certain of this: neither death nor life, no angel, no prince, nothing that exists, nothing still to come, not any power, or height or depth, nor any created thing, can ever come between us and the love of God made visible in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

When I was having my meetings with Fr Edward, I visited a lot of Catholic churches in and around York. And now I can go back to them, able to receive Communion. It makes my spirits sing.

Edward Ramsden, 33, lives and works in York.