

STEPPING OUT IN FAITH

FORMER CATHOLICS
TELL THEIR STORIES



EDITED BY
MARK GILBERT

STEPPING OUT IN FAITH

FORMER CATHOLICS TELL THEIR STORIES

EDITED BY
MARK GILBERT



matthiasmedia

Stepping Out in Faith

© Matthias Media 2012

Matthias Media

(St Matthias Press Ltd ACN 067 558 365)

PO Box 225

Kingsford NSW 2032

Australia

Telephone: (02) 9233 4627; international: +61 2 9233 4627

Email: info@matthiasmedia.com.au

Internet: www.matthiasmedia.com.au

Matthias Media (USA)

Telephone: 330 953 1702; international: +1 330 953 1702

Email: sales@matthiasmedia.com

Internet: www.matthiasmedia.com

Scripture taken from the Holy Bible, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION®.

Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by Biblica, Inc. All rights reserved worldwide.

Used by permission.

ISBN 978 1 921896 99 6

All rights reserved. Except as may be permitted by the Copyright Act, no part of this publication may be reproduced in any form or by any means without prior permission from the publisher.

Cover and interior design by Lankshear Design.

With thanks to Cecily Paterson, Baerbel Meteling
and Tara Smith.

CONTENTS

Introduction	7
1. When everything else is gone Alex Morbelli.....	9
2. Confident in God's love Gerard O'Brien	21
3. A wretch like me Matt Schmucker	33
4. The ultimate fresh start Ngaira Smith.....	43
5. Letting in air and light Tony Coffey.....	53
6. Words of eternal life Omar Anheluk.....	63
7. Authentic church Alex Purnomo.....	73
8. No more fear Eddie Piani	83
9. Learning to trust Angelo Porcu.....	93
10. A retired Catholic Gay Ross.....	103
11. Certainty for eternity Mark Gilbert.....	109
Call to action.....	123

INTRODUCTION

GROWING UP, I WAS TAUGHT THAT THE CATHOLIC CHURCH was the one true church.

When I was a child this was easy to believe because the priests and nuns seemed so special. They lived in convents and seminaries; they always took the places of highest honour at religious festivals, at mass and at school; buildings were named after them; they wore special clothes; and their choice not to have families seemed very spiritual.

The Pope was a rock star! Millions of people flocked to see him. Kings, queens, presidents and prime ministers bowed down to him. He often appeared on TV and he lived in one of the biggest palaces with some of the most beautiful artwork in the world. The Vatican was a masterpiece, a country all on its own with untold treasure—Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel, the Pietà, Bernini's Colonnade.

And the Catholic Church was the oldest church, going right back to the time of Jesus. Only in the Catholic Church did Jesus come into the bread and wine every time mass was said—no other Christian church could make that claim! Only the Catholic Church could make people saints—and there sure were a lot of saints and statues and relics and holy places and miracles.

And the Catholic Church was the best way to get to heaven. I learned that although most people could get to heaven, it was easiest in the Catholic Church.

No wonder I thought it was the only church to belong to—until the cracks began to appear.

When I considered leaving the Catholic Church to join another Christian church, I thought I was the only person on earth to have such thoughts. The only people I knew who left the Catholic Church seemed to leave Christianity altogether. How could I make such a decision? How could I decide the Catholic Church had got it so wrong? How could I think of changing churches?

But I did leave, and it was the best and most difficult decision I've ever made. And I've found many others who have made similar decisions. This book contains some of their stories.

As with all of life, these stories are open books. Changing churches is rarely easy. Life is messy. Some of the people in this book left the Catholic Church a generation ago; others left much more recently. Their lives are still a work in progress. The two things they all have in common are that they were born Catholic and they are seeking to grow closer to Jesus.

If you are reading this book, you may be questioning the Catholic Church too. The contributors to this book want to help you think through these questions. You are not alone—many men and women have left the Catholic Church and grown much closer to God.

In this book, men and women share their stories of the roads they have travelled to follow Jesus. Whether you are considering a path that may take you away from the Catholic Church or not, I hope these stories will be an encouragement for you to take the path that will lead you to peace with God.

Mark Gilbert

November 2012

1 | WHEN EVERYTHING ELSE IS GONE ALEX MORBELLI

I N MARCH 1996, AT AGE 44, MY HUSBAND CARLOS WAS diagnosed with advanced terminal cancer. There was nothing the doctors could do, and they gave him between three and six months to live.

On this day in March he went to the hospital with severe back pain, expecting the doctors to confirm our suspicion that a disc was out of place in his spine. But instead his doctors moved him to the oncology department, and he left the hospital with a death sentence. I was incredulous, and for a while I believed they must have made a mistake. Sadness and confusion followed, but I put these feelings on hold because we had to deal with so many other things.

We had two young children. My son was eight and my daughter only two. Probably the most difficult moment for me (but how much more difficult for my husband!) was the evening he told our son that he did not have a long time left to live. They had been such close mates, and he had been such a loving father, that their pain was almost too much to witness.

For the next few months we tried to live a life resembling normality, though Carlos became quite restricted in the things he was able to do. My daughter was too young to understand what was going on, but I am certain that she sensed the sadness and the poignancy of those months.

One night over dinner my son mentioned the Olympic Games, which were due to begin later that year. My husband got up and left the room and, after a little while, I followed him. He was crying. He told me he had never thought that someone's heart could ache out of sheer sadness. He was not going to be able to watch the Olympics with his son, commenting as they watched, as they did with so many sports.

It seemed strange, he said, that he could not think of the future any more because he was not going to be part of it. He would never see his daughter grow up or his son play soccer for school. He wouldn't be able to love me, his wife, any more. All the things that had been so important to him in this life were crumbling away, becoming meaningless.

And then he said something I will never forget. "When everything else is gone," he said, "only God is left". Everything in our lives that had seemed necessary and important had now become nothing. And when all else fades away, God remains.

This had a profound effect on me. I realized I didn't want it to take a death sentence to make me understand that the most important relationship in my life is my relationship with God.

My husband died on a very cold morning in July, almost four months after his cancer had been discovered. He never got to see the opening of the Olympic Games, and we, his family, were devastated.

But I have begun halfway through the story. Let me go back to the beginning.

I grew up in Argentina, a country blessed with an amazing variety of landscapes and natural resources. By descent I am Italian and Spanish. For most people, being Argentine equalled being Catholic, and I was no exception.

I attended a Catholic school for all of my primary and secondary education. I am grateful for the fine education I received, for the friendships I found there (some of which have lasted through the years), and for the values that both the nuns and the teachers passed on to me.

Outside of school I attended mass with my family on Sundays and shared with them in many of the religious celebrations like Christmas, Easter, baptisms and first communions. Many Argentine holidays and celebrations revolve around the Catholic calendar. One of my favourite festivals was the coming of the wise kings. The story is that the wise men come each year during the night on January 5th and leave toys for the children who have behaved well during the year, just as they brought presents to baby Jesus. Children place their (well-polished) shoes on the windowsill and leave water and grass for the camels to eat.

In 1983, my husband and I immigrated to Australia. It was both exciting and daunting for us to learn how to live in a very different culture. Our shared sense of humour helped us laugh off problems and cultural misunderstandings. These challenges helped us to grow closer as a couple. We were young and we were in love and we thought we could conquer anything and everything.

There were many times when I missed my family and friends terribly. I walked along the beach sometimes, praying and asking God to help me not to be sad. Carlos had also been brought up as a Catholic, and we found a local Catholic church that we attended often but by no means regularly. Although we

did not feel part of the congregation, it was more from lack of effort on our part than anything else.

Our lives were not that different from those of ordinary Australians. We went to work, to school and to the beach. Although we had a respectful and fearful attitude towards God, we lived our daily lives without much reference to him.

After eight years in Australia we did what many immigrants do and returned to our home country to be with family and friends. But beginning again in Argentina was difficult, and the nostalgia and homesickness that had brought us back home were replaced by the difficulties of day-to-day life and the realization that we had changed and it was hard to fit in again. We lasted two and a half years before we returned to Australia, just in time for our son to start school and, later that year, to welcome our beautiful daughter into the world.

As our family grew, so did our need to pass on to our children some of the values close to our hearts. Our Catholic faith was one of these. Our daughter was baptized and my son took the Sacrament of Reconciliation in the church we were attending. At home we tried to follow some of the traditions we had grown up with in Argentina.

But then my husband got cancer, faced a short and devastating illness and his own death, and told me that when everything else is gone, only God is left.

As I look back on that time, I can see a story within the story. Isn't it always like that? I can see that even before I realized I needed to work out where I stood with God, God had already set in place the circumstances that would allow me to do so.

When my son started school and began to make friends, I began to meet more women my age. Among the new group of

mothers I got to know well were four lovely Christian women. We shared many playground chats and school activities as well as birthday parties, shopping expeditions and a great number of cups of tea. And then, one lovely afternoon in March, I shared with them the terrible news of my husband's illness.

My son's teacher and the school counsellor were very supportive, but we did not have any family in Australia and, in the middle of such a crisis, we felt lonely and very far away from our family and friends in Argentina.

I cannot possibly describe all the ways that these four Christian women and their families surrounded us with their support and encouragement at such a difficult time. They showed their concern for us in very practical ways. They cooked beautiful hot meals for us and looked after the children when we had to go to doctors' appointments. They sat and made cups of tea for me as I allowed the tears to come. They accompanied me to do the grocery shopping or they did it for me.

What made a deep impression in my somewhat dazed brain was that there was something special about the way they went about doing all this. I couldn't quite explain it. They were full of kindness and compassion. They gave without counting the cost or expecting anything in return. I had never experienced that from people outside my family and very close friends.

The year before my husband was diagnosed with cancer, Mary, one of the mothers at school, invited me to attend a Bible study group organized by her church. I had had many talks in the playground with these Christian women and I was intrigued by their commitment to what they believed and the ways in which their lives showed (unlike mine) that God was not reserved for Sundays only. They clearly had him at the centre of their lives.

When Mary gave me my first Bible, I was excited. Until then I had only owned a New Testament. It had travelled everywhere with me since I was 15 but had rarely been opened. At one level, because I am a translator by profession, the idea of reading a passage, analysing it and searching for its meaning held great intellectual appeal. At another level, I was excited by the fact that I could read the whole of the Bible myself, whenever and wherever I wanted to. That first Bible study was my introduction to God's word. The Bible no longer belonged in a drawer or on a shelf. I could hear God speak to me from those pages.

The following year I joined another Bible study group, this time at the Anglican church that three of the other mothers attended. The only other time I'd been in a church that wasn't a Catholic church was in Buenos Aires. I was probably 18 or 19 years old, and had taken refuge in a church to escape the noise and heat and crowds. I remember sitting there for a few minutes before realizing that it was a Protestant church. I was struck by the simplicity of the church, with no images but with Bibles in every pew.

I grew to love those Tuesday morning Bible studies at the Anglican church. Other mothers and volunteers looked after my daughter and the other children, and I was free to read and learn from God's word. I had never been encouraged to do this and I suddenly felt a thirst to know more and more. I was in a group of about ten women who patiently and graciously answered my questions and discussed with me my understanding of who God was and what place he had in my life.

It was only a few weeks after I started attending this group that my husband was diagnosed with cancer. I was at a loss to understand what was happening, and I wanted God to speak to me and tell me why.

At this time we were attending a Spanish-speaking Catholic church every Sunday. My husband sat in an armchair that had been placed near the front especially for him. The chair seemed to grow bigger every week as his illness gradually consumed his body. The priest visited us almost daily, and he and my husband talked and prayed together. My son also started attending Sunday school with his best friend at the Anglican church.

In my Bible study I continued to hear God speak. I had never doubted God's existence, and I knew a lot about him through my Catholic upbringing. But I realized that although I had never stopped talking to him over the years, I had slowly pushed him into a corner of my life. I had put God in a place where I could find him if I was in need or lonely or just downright miserable. The great fervour of my teenage years had diminished to something between a pretence of faith and sheer indifference.

In the gospels I discovered a Jesus I had never known before. For the first time I heard what Jesus was saying as he clearly stated what we need and how to get it. I was amazed to hear God speak through the prophets of the Old Testament and to hear his promises repeated time and time again. I had never realized how important it is to read the New Testament in the context of the entire Bible, or understood that the God of the whole Bible is always the same.

As I read and discussed God's word with the others in the group I realized how important my Catholic upbringing, which had given me an understanding of many important truths, actually was. I knew that God was real, as was his Son, Jesus, and I had no doubt that Jesus had risen after his death on the cross. I was grateful for those who had taught me that God expects us to pray to him and that he always listens to those prayers. I was also

grateful to the nuns who had tried to instil in us the virtues of humility, compassion and a love for those in need, as modelled by Jesus Christ. I appreciated then how God had prepared me and carried me to the place in which I found myself.

I tried throughout that very difficult year to make sense of what was going on and to maintain a semblance of normality in a house where my beloved husband was dying. Many days and weeks of that time are just a painful blur.

Within the chaos, I was also living with the tension of trying to reconcile what I was hearing from God in the Bible and what I was seeing and hearing in the Catholic Church. I knew I would have to make a decision in this area at some point in time.

A few months after my husband's death I started attending the Anglican church where I had been going to Bible study, and my daughter joined my son at the Sunday school there.

One of the first things that struck me in this new church was the lack of religious icons and rituals, and so this was one of the first issues I had to confront. I had to let 'religion' go. A kind and insightful young woman who worked at the church helped me by going through the main teachings of both Catholics and Protestants. I had lots of questions, and she knew that I needed to understand where the things I'd always believed had come from. It was a painful process. At first I became very angry with this woman because she was pulling the rug from under my feet, so to speak. I watched so many of my beliefs crumble. Only later did I realize that the word that kept recurring in our talks together was the word 'added'. She showed me the dates when the Catholic Church had added doctrine after doctrine to the teachings of Jesus in the gospels. I also read many books on church history and other topics that helped me in my quest.

The people in my new church also encouraged me, time and again, to search for answers in God's word. When I was stuck, they reminded me that he speaks to us through his word.

I often thought about what my husband had said that night. "When everything else is gone, only God is left." I realized I needed to work at restoring my relationship with God. I realized that all of the rituals and the religion I had used to relate to God until then were as hollow as the icons on the walls. I read somewhere that religion is what we do when we are alone with God. I still had to discover that for myself.

I learned from God's word that the first thing I needed to do was recognize that I am essentially sinful. I actually had no problem understanding or accepting this concept, which I had been taught from an early age. But I had also been taught that I needed to confess my sins to a priest, who would be the go-between to secure a temporary pardon from God until I sinned again. This had not quite worked in my life, however. When I was about 18, I confessed my sins to an inappropriately inquisitive priest and experienced an epiphany that day. I was convicted that this priest was a mere man and could not possibly forgive my sins. And because I knew I would start sinning again—probably within the hour—I decided that I wasn't going to confess my sins to anyone except God himself. Again, God had been preparing me. From that day on, I was a 'bad Catholic' because I no longer believed in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. This created a great burden of guilt, however, as I could never be sure that God was listening or that he would forgive my sins.

I also grew up with the understanding that either heaven or hell awaits each of us at the end of our lives on earth. I was taught that on the Judgement Day, all of our good and bad deeds

will somehow be entered into some kind of calculator. If the balance of our good deeds is greater than that of our bad deeds and actions, then we will go to heaven. If it tips the other way, it will be hell. But I could never feel at peace with God about this. I pictured him shaking his head from side to side on Judgement Day in regret and saying, “You didn’t make it, Alex”. I felt an overwhelming burden. How much ‘good’ was good enough to be saved?

“When everything else is gone, only God is left.” This thought scared me to bits.

As I continued to read from different books of the Bible, I was able to follow God’s story. His plan for humanity began to make sense. And two words kept coming up again and again through it all: ‘justice’ and ‘grace’.

I more or less had an idea of what the word ‘justice’ meant as it referred to God. It took me quite a while to understand the word ‘grace’, however. I learned that grace is a gift from God. He loves us and has loved us since before we were born, with a love so great that he wants to bring us back to live in a perfect relationship with him. He knows us well and knows that we cannot do this by our own merit. This is why Jesus died on the cross. It was for each one of us personally.

The fact that Jesus was punished for all of my sins—present, past and future—so that I won’t be punished when I face God was the biggest revelation to me. All God asks is that we recognize that we have rejected him, and that we trust that Jesus has done this for us. We don’t need any other mediators—Jesus is the only way to God.

Although I started to grasp all of this at an intellectual level, I still wasn’t able to let go of the guilt and the burden of knowing

that I could never be ‘good enough’ to please God. I saw the people at my new church as nice people, and I felt quite unable to be as nice and kind as they appeared to be. I couldn’t see that they were also sinners, just like me. I continued to try hard, but the more I tried the more inadequate I felt. I had been taught for so long that I could only be saved by my own efforts, and I could not completely shake this teaching.

Then one day I stopped trying. There was no way I could show God a love as awesome as the one he had shown me. I simply stopped trying, and emptied myself of all pretence and allowed God to love me. I knew Jesus had promised that we would never be alone—that his Spirit would live in, and help, those who trust in him.

So I let God love me and fill every corner of my life. I started to feel the burden of guilt lift from my shoulders as I realized that God had forgiven me and saved me by his grace. There was nothing else for me to do. All was well between God and me.

Today I am still a sinner, but I have been saved. I have no doubt that on the day I face God I will be clean and spotless in his sight and will be able to be with him forever. I am confident that I am clean and spotless in his sight even now, because Jesus has made me clean. I still sin. I am still sinful. I am even more aware now of my sinfulness, because God’s Spirit helps me to see it and to change. It is an enormous relief to know that I am not in control and that God is the one in control of my life. I am a Christian now—and that’s not just a word you circle on a form when you have to describe your religion. Being a Christian means that I’ve been transformed by Christ.

It has been almost 16 years now since that cold morning on which my husband died. Looking back, I can see how God has

been at work weaving all the threads of my story together. He is at work in my life and in the lives of my children. Even if I still don't understand why someone we loved so much had to die so young, I know that God knows why. And that is sufficient for me.

God has given me the strength and the support I have needed to bring up my children on my own, and he has given us his Christian family so that we have never felt alone. I can look back and see myself being changed by God day after day after day. God is still changing me day after day after day.

Being a Christian means that I have the certainty of heaven at the end, even though the immediate future is uncertain. Although life can still be difficult and frustrating and unfair, God gives me strength and patience and he walks with me. Being a Christian means that I still struggle with sin in my life, but I can humbly ask God every day to forgive and change me. Being a Christian means that as I make decisions in my daily life or about the immediate future, I strive to choose the course that will please God and not just myself. Being a Christian means that I don't live by or trust the wisdom of this world but rely on God to give me his wisdom each day. Being a Christian means that I will strive to do good and live God's way—not because these actions or good works will count for my salvation on the last day, but because I am so grateful that he had compassion on me and my family and saved us by his grace.

When I look back over the years I see that God has carried my children and me so far. I have confidence that he will continue to do so, and I know that wherever my life takes me next, God will be with me always.



A young boy in the confessional lies about his sin, knowing that he is choosing hell over shame and embarrassment. A young man in spiritual distress decides to become a priest so he can be sure he will go to heaven. A white leather Bible sits in a box on a shelf for years, off limits to the little girl who asks to see it, because it might get dirty. “Just do what I say,” a priest tells another boy who is full of questions about God, “and everything will be okay”.

In every one of these situations God transformed people by his word in the Bible, replaced lies with truth, and brought peace through the salvation that is only found in Jesus Christ. This is a book with not one but 11 happy endings.

The 11 individuals who share their stories of *Stepping Out in Faith* could not be more different. They are men and women from different generations and from around the world. But they have in common the peace they have found in God through the gospel of Jesus Christ.

ISBN 978-1-921896-99-6



9 781921 896996