

“A Perfect Storm Transformed My Heart”

Dan Balogh, March 2022

For most of my adult life, I was an atheist who avoided the church like the plague. For the last two years, I’ve been a zealous missionary disciple that my church can’t get rid of. How did this happen? Let me explain.

While I was born and raised a Catholic, nearly all of my earliest experiences with church made me abhor it. I stopped attending Mass when I got a job at Bell Laboratories, the cathedral to science and reason. Finding myself surrounded by devout, evangelical atheists, I put my life on atheistic autopilot and started having fun. Or so I thought.

When I met my future wife Laura in 1989, I was relieved to hear that while she was a Catholic, she no longer went to church. Having no children and high-paying jobs, we did whatever we wanted, like traveling the world.

In India, we met a family living in a hole in the ground with huge smiles on their faces. They were happy. In Tanzania, we met villagers that lived in huts and hunted animals with handmade spears. And they were happy. And I wasn’t, despite the fact that I had everything I wanted and needed. Or so I thought.

Laura eventually returned to the faith, started studying Catholic evangelization, and got more and more involved, even joining the pastoral council of the local parish. I noticed how happy she was. On our hikes, we discussed what she was learning in school. I enjoyed listening but was still an atheist.

A string of family tragedies impacted me greatly in 2013. Faced with thoughts of my inevitable mortality, I was forced to examine my life, dabbling in Buddhism, Taoism, and Zen. I read the *Bhagavad Gita* and the *Upanishads*. Nothing stuck. Then, in 2019 Laura quit her high-paying Manhattan job and found a job working at Notre Dame of Mt. Carmel. I encouraged her because I saw how happy she was becoming.

I finally relented and went back to Mass in September of 2019 for the first time in over 30 years. The radical hospitality of Notre Dame of Mt. Carmel blew me away. The love I felt from other parishioners and staff was palpable. This was nothing like the church of my youth!

And then Laura invited me to a series called Alpha. I didn’t want to go, but I did it to please her. The entire experience transformed me. At one point, I was overcome with feelings of euphoria mixed with guilt, joy mixed with remorse, and regret. Afterward, I felt the most profound sense of peace I had ever felt. I was renewed, filled with the Holy Spirit, with God’s love for the first time in my life.

After avoiding the church for over thirty years, they suddenly couldn’t get rid of me! I got involved in program after program, ministry after ministry. I ended up creating the Virtual Alpha



ministry after suggesting we take Alpha online during the first days of the pandemic. My incredibly dedicated Alpha team and I led four Virtual Alphas during COVID, accompanying over 120 souls on this beautiful spiritual journey.



They tell me that in a matter of about a year, I had gone from being an atheist to one of the key church leaders. How in the world did this happen? Looking back, I can clearly see that it was a perfect storm of four key factors converging at the same time.

First, through her love and perseverance, my wife Laura never gave up on me. She invited me to Mass probably 500 times. And while I declined the first 499 invitations, I finally accepted. Her caring and attentiveness over the course of many years softened my heart, setting the groundwork for the events that followed.

Second, the incredible parish of Notre Dame showed me and continues to show me amazing love. And now, being a member of the Hospitality Ministry, I convey this welcoming spirit to others joining us for Mass. Had I not felt that love that first time I returned to Mass in 30 years, you wouldn't be reading this article right now.

Third, my beloved Alpha was the perfect next step in my journey. As a curious agnostic, I begrudgingly attended it. At the end of the journey, I was a zealous missionary disciple. This has led to a ripple effect. I see souls transformed at every Alpha. I see parishioners energized, who join other ministries, who are eager to do more, and who want to follow Jesus more closely. As of this writing, I have reached out personally to 86 pastors in the Diocese of Paterson, offering to visit them and tell them about this wonderful program. I want others to experience what I felt.

Fourth, the amazing openness and trust of Fr. Paddy O'Donovan, and the staff of Notre Dame of Mt. Carmel, made all of this possible. They let me create and lead a large ministry even though I was an atheist three months prior! They saw the flame in me, and instead of squelching it, they trusted me and collaborated with me. And I see them doing the same with so many others every day. Had the parish dampened my enthusiasm anywhere along the way, none of this would have happened.

And bringing all of these factors together, as no one else can, is the Holy Spirit, the great composer and conductor of the beautiful symphony of our lives.

Nothing I have done in my life for financial reward has been anywhere near as rewarding as what I am doing now for the Kingdom. But it's not me alone who is doing this. I'm a part of something much bigger. We are bringing souls closer to Jesus. And, honestly, I can't imagine doing anything more important.

An opportunity to experience God's grace of transformation is available to you or a loved one who may have questions about life and faith or someone who may be searching for deeper meaning and purpose. Consider Alpha – all are welcome! For more details and to register, visit <https://www.ndcarmel.com/alpha>.

God bless you!

