

TESTIMONY OF JOHN HOLECEK

GOD'S FAITHFULNESS

I am eternally grateful to my parents for raising me as a Christian. In 1955, at age eight, I walked down the aisle of the First Baptist Church of McPherson, Kansas, and gave my heart to the Lord. If you were to ask me to articulate just what I believed at that time, I would be at a loss, but this much I do remember: it was God who prompted that act of faith and who gave me the grace to respond. Since then I have been many times faithless, but God has always kept faith with me.

Already in my childhood, God was preparing me for conversion to the Catholic Church. Although Baptists treat communion as symbolic and celebrate it infrequently, my soul was always profoundly moved by communion services.

Faith was not nominal in our home—we had family devotions, prayer at meals and were active in the church—but I began to fall away during high school until finally, the summer after my senior year, I prayed, “Lord, I no longer believe in you enough to pray.”

Thus began my descent into darkness.

I had always been a good student, and college was no exception. I graduated *magna cum laude* from Kansas State University with a double degree in German and Economics. I spent a year on scholarship at the University of Munich, which proved to be preparation for future service to God, although I had no intention of serving him at the time.

During senior year spring break, I traveled to Mazatlan, Mexico, where I had a significant Catholic experience. By now my life had become one of too much alcohol and casual sex, and my time in Mazatlan was spent in total dissipation. One morning, after an all-night session of drinking, I passed by a church in the center of town. For whatever reason, I went inside, and a Mass was in progress. I took a seat, and during the course of the Mass, I was struck by the futility of my life. I began to weep, not discretely but with loud sobs that left me prostrate in the pew.

Here I was, the epitome of the ugly American, a child of privilege and comparative wealth, stinking of beer, stretched out on my back, weeping disconsolately. However, instead of being ignored or asked to leave, I was instead surrounded by a group of Mexican peasants, who, despite the barrier of language, did their best to comfort me. As the day progressed, however, I put this wonderfully visible sign of God's love and manifestation of Catholic faith out of my mind.

A general sense of despair had, by now, become my constant companion, and the summer following graduation, I suffered a mental collapse. At the urging of my parents and our family physician, I entered a private mental hospital. I did desire help, but I also hoped that a psychiatric hospitalization would result in a 4F draft classification, as the Vietnam War was then raging.

During the evaluation process, I experienced the limitations of modern psychology. The various tests and interviews seemed to be directed toward a fictitious person—one made up of a pastiche of various psychological theories—not one of flesh and blood. I sensed that no real help would be coming from this quarter, and so, to amuse myself, I gave bizarre answers and responses, which resulted in a diagnosis of schizophrenia, and I was put on Thorazine and a regimen of group therapy, work therapy, and psycho-therapy. I

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became a very cooperative patient because I wanted out, and after six weeks I did leave against medical advice. I departed as depressed and despairing as I had entered.

The next 12 years of my life were lived without hope. I was obsessively preoccupied with self, and sin was my master. During this period, I went on to film school at the University of Southern California and began working in the media. I met a woman and moved in. When she became pregnant, an abortion was procured without the slightest thought of the moral dimensions of the act. Eventually we married but were later divorced. I began living with another woman who also got pregnant and who also had an abortion. Had you asked me at the time if I were a good person, I would have answered yes. My friends would have said the same.

In 1981 I began edging my way back to God. I started attending Hollywood Presbyterian Church and joined on Valentine's Day 1982. Even so, I was locked in a mighty struggle, fueled, I believe, by the Devil's desire for my soul, which he had every right to—except that I had been baptized and had once believed. Now, even though I received instruction, I didn't know what I believed: I could not reconcile a triune God with monotheism, nor could I believe in a resurrected Christ. I did, however, have the will to believe.

Throughout these years, I suffered recurrent bouts of depression, and during this period, I experienced the most severe episode of my life. I begged God for deliverance, but none came. To protect what sanity I had left, I decided to spend some time with my parents.

While home, a television producer for whom I had worked in Boston tracked me down and offered me a short-term job at good pay, a direct answer to prayer as my financial situation was bleak—and I did thank God. Because some of the initial organizational work could be done by phone, I began work that very day.

By day's end, my spirits had lifted, and I was proud of all I had accomplished. Then, at supper, I had an attack whose symptoms were a combination of heart attack and panic attack: pain shot down my left arm; my heart began pumping with an incredible fury; and I was overwhelmed by anxiety.

I excused myself and went downstairs, followed by my parents. When I explained what was happening, my father gave me a Librium and then a nitroglycerin tablet, neither of which helped. He then decided to take me to the hospital, but I refused. "No," I said, "we'll pray instead." By now I was weeping, as was my mother.

We sat down on the couch, held hands, and I sobbed, "Lord, you have brought me this far, and you won't abandon me now." And he didn't; the attack immediately began to subside, and that night I slept peacefully.

The next day I pondered what had happened. Although I received no particular revelation, it seemed to me then, and still does, that God was saying, "I gave you a job when you asked, and you slipped immediately back into your old habits of mind and behavior. I have your life in my hand. If you want to serve me, do it!" So I surrendered myself, very imperfectly but as best I could, to the will of God.

And so began my ascent back out of darkness.