

Sacred Heart, Changeless Friend

A Memoir by Sister Fiona



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God gave you a push.”*

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Family Background

I suppose I should start from the very beginning of my life. I came from a very Catholic home. My parents were from Ireland, so it was a very prayerful home, a very prayerful upbringing in my faith. I remember long before I started school, maybe from the age of 3 or 4, my mother talked about Jesus and Blessed Mother a lot. She would tell stories as she was giving my sister and me a bath. I remember Jesus seemed very real, truly He did.

My mother's mother and her sisters and brothers were living in Ireland. From the time I could remember I wanted to meet them. We had a big sea shell and I'd put it up to my ear, and I'd hear these sounds like the waves of the ocean and I'd ask my mother and she'd say "That's the ocean you're hearing," so I'd push it very hard into my ear, thinking maybe I could hear my grandmother talking.

I have a sister and a brother. My sister is a very, very fine person. She attends Mass every morning, and they have adoration in their parish, so she stays after Mass. They have exposition of the Blessed Sacrament three days a week. They're all very good Catholics in that family. My brother and his wife attend Mass every morning. They have a good home. They're all delightful, they're all so nice and they're all good to me.

The Call

There was a little church down the street from our house. It was not ours; churches were national. We had one not too far from us that was Polish. You really had to be Polish to go there. Slovaks were the same way. Our church was further west, but we loved this little church as well. In the afternoon when the weather was nice my mother would take my sister and me over to make a visit – that was a big thing, to make a visit. I remember seeing this nun up at the altar, I never saw her face, but she had her back to us and she was laying out the linens on the altar. And I knew then, that's what I wanted to be. I knew it so firmly, I really did. This was before I started school; I'd say I was about 4 at the time.

Devotion to St. Therese was very popular at the time. She was not canonized yet – she was canonized in 1925, so this was like the year before. I was enrolled in the Saint's confraternity. I was so taken with that and her picture and her habit – as a little kid all that attracted me. It was like we were so much a part of heaven in a sense. And then, of course, I went to a Catholic school.

We moved to our own parish. That was the other factor – we lived across from the church, school, and convent until I entered the community. I was watching the nuns all the time. Of course they were teaching in the school, but they'd call us over to mail their letters or to come to the convent and help fold paper napkins for the dining room table, and I loved doing that. So all this fed my great desire, which I never deviated from after that. I know a lot of people, many nuns, feel the call in grade school, but so many of them in high school or before graduation, somewhere along the line. Anyway, of course, I idolized the sisters, and our closeness to the

church with daily Mass. My mother would go to daily Mass, so that was so much a part of our lives.

Then we had 40 hours devotion in our parish. I loved it. The classes all had turns for adoration. It started on Friday, and it culminated on Sunday with the feast of Christ the King. I went with my class half an hour. Every class had a turn, but I would take extra turns, and it was so easy because I lived so close. But the church meant everything, like whenever there was a wedding I would dash over there. I mean, I'd watch them go in; I wanted to see what they looked like, what the bride looked like.

As I said, the church, my faith, that was my life. It was nurtured certainly in my home. My father had gone to a Catholic school and he was taught by nuns. In fact, the one who taught him in 7th grade became the superior of our school. She was a young nun when she taught him. So many moved up from the school to our parish. So prayer was uppermost in our home, and that's what really fed my vocation.

Then I went on to high school, and I got a scholarship, which was the only way I could go to Catholic high school. This school was also taught by nuns. I met a nun there who became interested in me for some reason or other. She asked me one day if I'd like to read this book. It was by Father Pluss, who was a French Jesuit, called *God Within Us*. It was beautiful; it was like a gift, a great grace, and that deepened my relationship with the Lord.

Then at retreat, the priest recommended a small book called *My Changeless Friend*. It was, I think, by Edward Garasché S.J. I tell you, through all the ups and downs, it is as clear as though I read it yesterday – just the title itself was enough for me. You know – as you have found out, since you're old enough – it's the ups and downs, the valleys and the mountains, and disappointments. But always, even up to this very day, *My Changeless Friend* has captured me more than anything else that has sustained me through my religious life.

God's Manifestation

I think reading *God Within Us* might have enforced that belief that not only is God in me but He's in each of the others too. There was a particular nun who was a grace and a gift for me. I always wanted to be a sister, but then being shy, when the chips were down and it was time, I needed a push. And she was the one who did it – she talked to me after graduation about entering the convent.

Well, I felt I wanted to work a year to help my family. I got paid very little, and I didn't know shorthand or typing because I wasn't in the commercial classes. I was in the college bound program. But when you go out, well, if you know the alphabet you can get a job. So, I didn't know which way to go, but the nun kept after me because she seemed to think this is where I should be. Of course it's where I'd always wanted to be, but when the chips were down, how could I just pick up and leave my family?

Well, fortunately, one week after we entered high school in freshman year, our homeroom teacher got some of us together and said, "I think you should give up your study periods and prepare for the teaching exams. Begin now." Well, I knew I wanted to be a teacher, at least to be prepared. I thought, just let me earn some money, and I'll go later. At the same time, I didn't have to pay tuition at all, so maybe I could handle that.

So I had this job for a year, and I did pass all the written, physical and oral exams, and they were really stiff. The very last test was an interview. We all had to be interviewed at the college, and the person who interviewed me had been a graduate of my high school. But my school was famous for having lots of graduates in the public school system. It was known, and

in fact, it bothered the people at the head in the public school system, since I guess they didn't want all these Catholic girls. But the Sisters at my school of course were older, and our nuns who were in charge of the education in the community felt that was the way to go and really pushed to get girls into the public school system. As I said, there were a lot of us, and all my friends were going to be teachers. But the admission ticket was good for two years, and so I thought, "Well, I'll work a year, then if I want to be a nun I'll have to go then, because if I don't make it, if they don't accept me, if I don't make the training or whatever, I'll go into the public school system." My admission would be good for only two years, so I *had* to make a decision.

You can think of all these little ways of how God works in your life. I saw God through a nun – she was an older nun, the Freshman teacher, who prepared us and urged us to take the teaching exams, to study for them. Anyway, all those pieces of the puzzle had fit in together so well.

It was 2 ½ years, and I was in seventh heaven. I loved it. But I look back and wonder how I left my widowed mother and my sister and brother. But I remember the superior principal at the high school. There were 5 of us who entered that year and she was a convert herself. She said you will wonder as you look back later on how you did it, and you know that God gave you a push. That's all I can say that some of these other questions I have now, about how could I have done this or that. And yet we *know* that the Holy Spirit moves us. At the time, I was a smart enough girl to have figured a lot of that out, but, it just seemed God's will. My mother did not object, and there were families where parents objected. They objected to their daughters entering, but my mother didn't because she was so steeped in God's will. The Lord works with us differently, each one according to her own dispositions. If it weren't for this sister who saw something in me, who saw that this was where I should be, I wonder if I would have pursued it even though I wanted it because I didn't have the get up and go. I needed a push.

She was the agent in my faith. Through my life, God puts people in our way. That's what I pray for, with my nieces and nephews, who are in colleges. I pray that they meet the right people, and I'm not so sure that a few of them go to church. Of course my mother and father would turn over in their graves. But what can you do? You can pray, I mean that's what I feel. I can't preach to them, so it's hard to know... the best is prayer.

I pray to the Holy Spirit a lot to lead me and to enlighten me, and my devotion to Blessed Mother--at least one rosary a day. Sometimes it's nighttime before I do it, and I'm falling asleep saying the rosary.

How God has spoken to me at different times in my life

When I was a youngster, I think before I started school, my mother had a picture of the Crown of Thorns. I don't see these pictures much anymore. Of course young parents would frown upon ever having a picture up like this. On Saturday mornings I used to get up on the pillows and stand and keep looking at that and I wanted to know what it was. And my mother explained that Jesus died with a Crown of Thorns. And I would keep looking at it and looking at it. I had such an imagination. When I was in kindergarten, I saw the nuns with their habits. There were two pins that held on this "border" we called it, and I knew that the nuns were like Jesus – see, I associated – and I thought that you have to have those just like the crown like Jesus had, and those were the two pins that attached to the cap. Well, they weren't in their skin at all, but I thought it was. I thought, "Now I don't know if I can be a sister, because I don't know if I can do that." I didn't cringe, but, anyway I was so conscious of Jesus dying. Well, then we went to this little church on the boulevard. During Lent all the statues were covered with red and

purple, and so I went to the Stations of the Cross with my mother. I was aware of the Passion, but my imagination would go wild, too.

As I said, I was so immersed in this, in the Passion. On Friday my mother and I would go over to the Stations of the Cross. I remember the altar boys going around with the Priest, and holding a lighted candle. This was my life.

How my relationship with God changed during my novitiate

We had half an hour meditation every morning. We rose at 5:00 a.m. and at 5:20 we went to the chapel. We had morning prayers, and then a half hour meditation before 6 o'clock Mass. Oh, yes, my relationship with God deepened. Of course, spiritual reading books were the only books that we were allowed to read. My reading enriched and deepened my relationship so I was having a more adult relationship with the Lord than when I was a little kid.

God's Will

Obedience was so impressed on us. Is it Dante who said that in God's will is our peace? I strongly believe that. In following His will only then do we have peace of soul, no matter how difficult it might be. As I said, when the Mother General asked me to go out West, she asked me "How will your mother take this?" It was simple, really, that whatever God's will was, that I said "No, she won't object." I knew that. She understood. I was so grateful. I came back to the Midwest in the 60's. They had a great high school there, and I was a high school counselor, and I went out every weekend to my mother. She died in the mid-70s, so I was grateful to have been situated there. She was very independent and didn't expect anything extra.

How God speaks to me today

I feel that God speaks to me today. Community living, the needs of the nuns to be aware of and alert. Sometimes it is very tiring and I don't feel well. Any time I go to help someone, or whatever the case may be, I always feel better. And the other thing that I do – on Tuesdays I go to the hospital – I go to the maternity floor. Of course now there are cancer patients, too; they're trying to fill up the place. It's brand new, only a year old. I meet these young couples, and their new babies, and after dealing with grade and high school kids, it's a whole different ball game. And see, I was never around when my nieces and nephews were born, when they were little. My sister would write and say, "Oh, so-and-so is pregnant, would you pray, they're having a hard time." One of them was 3 months in bed. I prayed, but I never saw my nieces and nephews as babies in those years. It's a real eye opener. When I meet these young couples, I'm really impressed. They say young people aren't going to church anymore –well, I'm meeting young couples who *do* go, and, especially when the young fathers are there, they'll say "Sister, it's a miracle!" They're so overwhelmed when they see this newborn baby, whole and entire, and they look at little fingers and ears and all, and say it's God's creation. So, as I said, this is an eye opener, and I hope my brother and my brother-in-law were like that. It's a new experience for me.

Then I go to one floor where they're in the beginning stages of cancer. They know, their eyes fill up with tears, so I stay longer with them. I'm so impressed with the doctors and nurses and all the people working to help. I feel good about it, to tell you the truth, and as I said it's opened my eyes, to see how good people are.

I'm on about 8 committees here in the house – you know simple things, like passing mail, the Library, keeping the newspapers in the right place and the display, and taking them down. Nothing monumental, but still it's a responsibility. And I read to a few sisters who can't read, whose sight is leaving, and that sometimes takes a couple of books, and that takes time. Half an hour and then I'm out of breath.

Changing relationship with God

Other people are an inspiration to me. I feel like I receive more than I give. Some days I think, "Can I make it?" I didn't sleep well, and I'm kind of dragging, and when I come out of those rooms, I'm just so glad I didn't give in and stay home, because I receive so much from them. And these are all young people, for the most part. Meeting women in their 40's with cancer. That's hard, but these young mothers--it's just wonderful.

Having trouble hearing God

I'd say it's kind of common, not only in myself. The late 1960's was a hard time. We had a big meeting here in the Midwest, when I came back and I found things were really changing. That year, and those years following, when we took off the habit – we did everything so fast. I was befuddled you might say. I didn't know where God was in this. What did He *really* want? Who was right? I thought everybody thought the same, and I found out that nuns whom I was close to didn't always. It was very disappointing. I found that a very hard time. I prayed a lot, and sometimes I was just so tired of it all. People left, a couple of friends left the community, and they weren't the real young nuns either. I remember saying over and over, "No matter what happens, I am not leaving." I remember saying it out loud in my room. I was sure of it. I didn't know what God wanted or what He thought was right, but I kept saying, "I *know* this is where I'm supposed to be, and no matter how much we change, no matter what, I'm not leaving." That was a hard time.

Re-finding God

It's certainly not the way it was before the 60's, but I had to think of the way I see it, that's all -- by reading and listening and trying to put all the pieces together. I don't always agree with some people, but I accepted that, I accept that too. Friends I have right here, I know they don't agree with me totally, but generally yes. So I accept that. As I used to say to the students, "There are no two blades of grass alike, no two snowflakes the same," and I can't expect anyone to think exactly like me, or be the same as I. I've accepted that. I am who I am.

God was letting me stew in my juice, that's what. He was letting me work at it; He wasn't going to give me all the answers. I knew He was there. And I suppose it's like a parent when a child's beginning to walk. See how far you can go. It certainly strengthened my faith, I should say.

Importance of Mass and Eucharist

I was thinking of young people today and wonder how they can get through life without a deep faith. It's important that they nourish that – I mean, that they know more about their faith. I worry sometimes they don't know and weren't instructed as well as we were. Even if they went to Catholic schools. I'd say the big things are that Christ is a person, a real person in their lives, and to have that deep, deep faith. They can't nourish it if they don't go to church. The Eucharist, no matter what, is central in our lives, and that's what I would say. It's simple. I don't know

how you can go through life just on your own, not relating at all to your faith, to Jesus. I don't know. It's scary. If I didn't have Him, I don't know what I would have been like.

As I said, the important things are nourishing the faith and the Eucharist. And that Jesus *is* a person in our lives. I used to say that to the young nuns – unless Jesus is a *person* in your life, you're not going to make it. Pictures help a lot. I have a lovely picture of the Sacred Heart. That was a great devotion in Ireland, too. If you're not referring to Him, or if He's not a real person to you, it's going to be very hard.

God as a Friend

I talk to Him all day, about whatever I'm going to do. In my own way, in a very homey kind of way! On the way down here, I looked up at the picture and I asked God to give me the words to speak, and the same to Blessed Mother, and the Little Flower (St. Therese) -- I have her relic. I throw my worries on Him and say, "Jesus, I trust in you," and I ask for peace from worry about people or situations. Jesus Himself has said that too, to rely on Him and trust Him, trust, trust, trust. That's hard, because I'm a worry wart.

God bless us all, especially the students at Loyola, my Alma Mater, and the Jesuits who carry on the tradition of nurturing faith as well as education.