



Diocese of Fargo *Our Stories of Faith*

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The Carson's Story

Twenty years after Jack and Barb Carson left the Catholic Church, Pope John Paul II drew them back. Their journey for truth followed a long, winding path.

Jack, an Italian, was born and raised Catholic. He attended Catholic schools as a child and had an uncle who was a Monsignor. In high school, Jack considered a vocation to the priesthood.

"I never doubted the existence of God and I never took issue with my Catholicism," he said. However, after Vatican II, "being a conservative Italian Catholic, the guitar Mass came in and I didn't like that at all." He also didn't feel comfortable with the handshake or embrace of peace that became a part of the Mass, among other liturgical changes.

The Carsons lived in the country on 40 acres of land near Bismarck where Jack worked as a physician. As he grew more frustrated with the changes in the Catholic Church, he began to look elsewhere. "I studied every religion and found errors with all of them," he said. Finally, he decided he didn't need organized religion and, instead, spent much of his free time praying as he rode his horse across the prairie.

However, after several months of not attending a church, the Carsons felt their



family was missing something. The Carsons were invited to a Catholic charismatic meeting at a Bismarck church and Barb found much of what she had been missing. She never pushed Jack into embracing Catholicism, but she would leave hints of her hopes for him

around the house in the form of Catholic books.

One night, Jack was irritable. His medical practice was going well, he had nothing to worry about, yet he was very unhappy. He picked up a book Barb had on a table -- "Come Away My Beloved" by Frances J. Roberts -- and decided, in his desperation for guidance in his faith, that it was time to test God's intentions for him.

With the book in his hands, he prayed, "Lord, if you're real and if you're trying to talk to me, show me." He opened the book to a random page and read, "Fling aside thy fears. Lo, I have sought thee, following thee upon the hills and pursuing thee through barren wastes. Yea, I have called after thee, but thou hast not heard." The words set him aback. He thought of all the times he'd ridden his horse "upon the hills", upon the "barren wastes" seeking God. Yet his stubbornness would not let him give in. "I said, 'Lord, if it's really you, do it again.'" He did! Three times the Lord vividly

answered his prayer when he randomly opened the book. Jack replied in urgent prayer to God, "Okay, I'll go to a prayer meeting!" and, for the next 10 to 15 years, the Carsons threw themselves wholeheartedly into the Catholic charismatic movement. Jack grew to love the guitar music, the affectionate greetings, and the focus on a personal relationship with Jesus Christ.

But, eventually, the Carsons grew dissatisfied again. They sought out a religion that was less traditional, more independent. They settled into another Christian, but not Catholic, church and were members of that faith for the next 20 years. During that time, they moved from their rural home near Bismarck to Fargo.

The yearning for something more, however, was never fully satisfied. "As the years went by, I realized I would love to go to Midnight Mass or I would love to do the Living Stations," Barb said.

Jack added, "We'd been discussing things we missed. The liturgy and the Eucharist were the two big things." Their new non-catholic faith taught them that communion was symbolic. Deep inside, they knew, from their Catholic roots, that it was more than that.

Their yearning for the Catholic faith they had left deepened as they watched the television coverage of the illness and death of Pope John Paul II. Barb was overcome by how the ailing pontiff was "not only teaching us how to live in the Lord, but how to die."

She said, "John Paul II wasn't just the Catholic pope. He

went beyond the robes. He never compromised his Catholicism. He had a way of really expressing the true love of Jesus. The press was pretty kind to him. I think even they knew...it was the power and the love of Jesus coming through him. People flooded into the Square, people of all faiths, knowing that there was just a genuine truth in this man."

Pope John Paul's witness led Barb to confession and back to Mass. She still attended their regular church service on Sunday with Jack, but also worshipped at the Saturday evening Catholic Mass. After a few weeks, Jack decided to attend Mass with her.

From that point on, Jack's appetite for information about the Catholic faith could not be satiated. He read book after book. He read the Scriptures, writings of the Fathers of the Church, reflections written by those who returned to the Catholic faith. He soon discovered the reality of Catholic teachings, exclaiming to himself, "It's all here and it's scriptural and it fits!"

They came full circle. The structure and adherence to Catholic teachings that once turned them away, now anchors them to their Catholic faith. "We're living in a time where the Church has to hold the line," Barb said.

The Carsons attend daily Mass and love receiving Christ in the Eucharist. "Now we're at the point where we can't stand it if we have to miss daily Mass," Jack said. Barb added, "It all has been so special to us...coming back."



*Jack and Barb Carson
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