



Diocese of Fargo
Our Stories of Faith

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The Bethlehem Community's Story

In the 1970s and 1980s many charismatic and evangelical Christians in America were forming communities for mutual growth in their Christian life. Such was the case in Portland, Oregon. A number of families and singles from diverse backgrounds had come to know each other well in a charismatic Baptist church. After living in "Discipleship Houses" through the 1970s, some, by 1981, had determined to make their commitment to follow Christ *together* a permanent one. Bethlehem Community became a legal entity. What was it, in the next ten years that by 1991 landed these evangelical believers, together, in the outer court of the Catholic Church, seriously searching to answer the question, "Is this the place we belong?" As one of those community members, I sketch here how it came about.

The realities of living life closely together had put the pressure on! In those ten years Bethlehem Community had developed an interdependent pattern of life. Children were at the center; our own modest business (a bakery with a campus coffee shop) was developing. Whether income should keep coming from individuals holding other jobs *outside* our life was a tension point--especially given that property taxes for our apartment dwelling had increased beyond our ability to pay. Yet meanwhile, by the grace of God, we had

been learning priceless truths about how we could make room for ourselves and one another to live and grow in the dynamic of faith. Slowly we were becoming a spiritual family. Differences between leaders had emerged, however, that we couldn't resolve. We needed an authority greater than our own, not only for practical questions, but for absolution of our personal sins. One important point was coming to a head, abetted by our immediate financial stress: we were suffering from our inability to agree on where we belonged in God's greater church.

Long ago we had parted amicably with the Baptist church where we had met. The nearby college campus ministry center allowed us to use their interdenominational chapel; but we knew our aloneness wasn't desirable. Though we tried to find alliance with various Christian community groups across the country, in the end, none of them fit us. What we did not yet know was that we were on the verge of a great faith journey.

It wasn't apparent to everyone at the time, but influences from the Catholic fullness of faith had long been quietly seeping into our way of thinking. These came both through individuals' unique experiences and communally. The Catholic charismatic movement had reminded us long ago that Catholics,

even non-charismatic ones, could be vibrant Christians (!). The pro-life movement revealed to our families, who as a matter of course were pro-life and were not contracepting, that Catholic teaching supported our practice--whereas the typical Protestant stance was for contraceptive "responsibility." Christian history, coming through reading or studies, had given some of us a living contact with voices from the early centuries: St Augustine and others; St Benedict (whose Rule we, as a community, could easily relate to); the Desert Fathers--whose pithy sayings Jack Sharpe would read aloud at times to us. G. K. Chesterton, of the wise and lovable Fr Brown mysteries, gave a Catholic interpretation of history in *The Everlasting Man*. A priest acquaintance, in a rare incidental discussion, had helped some of us to overcome the misunderstanding of how Catholics see Mary by distinguishing the "worth-ship" of Mary (veneration) from the unique worship of God. Importantly, it seemed the Catholic Church saw something of value in poverty, weakness, failures and suffering; and we--as we learned to value ourselves in the furnace of life together--did too. These "negatives," we found, when offered to God, gave Him room to do what only He could do. Our own total community life kept looking more like Catholic spirituality, less Protestant.

More personal experiences accumulated--a mosaic that ultimately would form a picture. Louise, in prayer long ago, had experienced Mary's consoling presence. Jim, during a year volunteering in France at Jean Vanier's l'Arche community, longed for the consolation of the Eucharist. (As a

community we believed Jesus' words in John 6, and, therefore, in the Real Presence of the Eucharist--except that we still didn't understand the fully incarnational Church and the priesthood that flowed from this gift). Alicia, reading in the Gospel of John as she wondered where we belonged, was struck by the words of Jesus, "there shall be one flock, one shepherd." She became convinced that those words pointed to the Catholic Church. Wasn't its claim to authority the age-old voice of Gospel authority?

Now decisions could not be delayed. We moved to more affordable quarters in Vancouver, Washington and finally addressed the deeper unsolved questions that had been left hanging. Jack Sharpe had a proposal. He suggested that we take the year ahead (it was September, 1991) as an inquiry year to learn fully about the Catholic Church. Let us see if we saw any reason why we could not belong there. Was there anything in Scripture, for example, that *really* conflicted with it? His startling proposal came as a shock, a surprise to some, a joy to others.

The next year was memorable. Some Catholics warned us of disarray in the Church, wondering why we should see a need to convert; others opened their hearts. One family, themselves converts, sent us a boxful of outstanding catechetical books. We began discovering the riches of the Church. It seemed we had opened the gate to a whole new "country" which, before, we had seen only at a blurred distance. "Disarray" did not disturb us who knew there would always be "bad fish" and "good fish" in the Church and that modern problems of secularism

and relativism troubled all denominations. In our case we were benefiting from an abundance of the Catholic charisms as we made friends with Fr. Joseph Hattie, O.M.I., who took us under his wing; Fr Emmerich Vogt, O.P., embodying Dominican teaching; Fr. Bernard Sander, O.S.B., of Mt Angel Abbey, affirming that a grace was at work in our community life; and Jesuit Fr. Joseph Fessio, who helped us in word and deed.

It took less than twelve months to assess what had happened. Three persons had left us for various reasons.

Otherwise each of us individually had made a journey of discovery into this Catholic Faith; all of us had shared, compared, and benefited together from the wealth of truth and holy witness we had been introduced to. Our children had been keenly participating at their various levels. It was time to make contact with the local parish priest, the Vietnamese Fr. Anthony Ton of St James Catholic Church. He was pleased. But 24 persons coming all at once into the Church next Easter? He threw his hands up to heaven in a gesture of begging for help!



On April 9, 1993, the members of Bethlehem Community entered the Church at the Easter Vigil. Two years later, another surprise would initiate new adventure, when they responded to an invitation to relocate in the Midwest, right in the Fargo Diocese. This current photo shows most of the members of the community.