

Thank you, Fr. Matera, and good evening everyone.

I hold in my hands a birthday gift from my father, given to me at age 14, and personalized with a two page note of encouragement from my dad.

I'm not sure that I ever really read it beyond the note from my dad. However, this Bible served as an occasion for my faith in God.

At age 14 I held a lot of hurt over my parents' divorce several years before and resentment over my father's decision to marry another woman. I directed my resentment towards my step-mother with unkind words and passive aggressiveness, which proved to be a source of discord and stress in my dad's house. But I felt justified by my behavior.

One day I sat in our living room with the Bible next to me. I decided to pick it up and as I held it, the thought came to me quite clearly and it went something like this: If I wanted to follow God, I needed to love my step-mom. It wasn't an audible voice, but it was a clear and convicting thought that challenged me on the spot. I knew I was being called out. I knew I needed to change, and I knew that that moment was when I needed to choose.

My step-mother was upstairs. I went upstairs and with tears and sobs I hugged her, told her I was sorry, and asked for her forgiveness. I know she was shocked, and I know it was awkward, but it was sincere.

That encounter with God and my step-mother was important, as it changed the course of my family life. It helped me become receptive to God's calling.

A year later I agreed to participate in a "Life in the Spirit Seminar" with other teens, a program designed to stir up the Holy Spirit among Christians. I found the 7-week program engaging. In week 5, we were prayed over individually with other adults, which included my father. I was encouraged to ask God into my life. As we prayed, a peace came over me that I had never experienced. The peace proved not to be

fleeting, it enveloped me for weeks. In some ways you could say that I became a new person, a new creation, my confidence grew, I became more outgoing, and I tasted genuine happiness. For me, this was evidence that God was real and that He loved me truly and personally.

While it is true that my life's path of faith and discipleship bears evidence of my many flaws, even more so has it been sustained and deepened by God's direction and goodness.

I am deeply grateful for this life, for God's Word, for the Eucharist, and for this great church that is filled with people as yourselves who help me live out my faith.

Thank you for listening.