

SHARON LOCANDRO

April 28, 1991 was a big day for my parents, sister, and I. We, along with 14 other college students at the University of New Hampshire, were initiated into the Catholic Church through Baptism, Confirmation, and 1st Communion. (Yes ---I received my sacraments in that order). How special it was to watch my mom get baptized!

Are you wondering what would prompt our family to become Catholic 20 years after my younger sister was born? We could have continued to live our lives without church or join a different faith, but we chose to become Catholic.

A wonderful priest, Father Rick, was on call at UNH the night a college freshman fell from his dorm room window. This student was in a coma and his family was by his bedside waiting and hoping for good news. That family was my family!

In the early hours of October 25, 1990, my brother's brain waves stopped. He was gone! The four of us, so sad and in shock, were suddenly faced with planning a funeral. Father Rick, who had been so supportive during the past 6 days in ICU, was there ready to take us under his wings to help us get through. The wake was at a small funeral home. I will never forget the funeral home scurrying around because the Bishop had arrived. My family was puzzled—we weren't even sure what a Bishop was!

The funeral, at a church near campus, was very crowded. I sat through the mass, listening to *On Eagle's Wings*, feeling so much a part of something BIG, even though I felt like such an outsider not knowing the words to say or when to kneel. I had been inside a Presbyterian church a handful of times as a child attending Sunday School in Colorado and had only attended one other Catholic mass in my life.

In the days immediately following the funeral, my sister and I returned to class while mom and dad went back to work. It was during one of those days while walking along a road lined with an occasional small tree, that I was feeling very sad and alone. As tears ran down my cheeks, a very large tree limb fell gently brushing my hand and providing such comfort. It was a sign helping me realize there was more to life and that my brother was close.

That night, dad called letting me know Father Rick invited us to Sunday night student mass and supper. Our family went to mass and felt such love and hope. Sunday nights became so special. The four of us were able to come together as a family; and be part of a bigger caring and supportive church family who provided just what we needed. My dad was the first to decide to join the RCIA class, but it didn't take long before each of us made that same decision.

1991 was a big year for me in other ways too. In February, I met my husband Ron and graduated in May. Ron and I were married in 1992. Father Rick, knowing I was concerned about doing and saying the right things during mass, had us sit on the altar facing our family & friends. What a joy to sit and watch our wedding ceremony unfold. Ron's family, all Catholic, were the ones to watch as they knew what to do. My family, predominantly non-church goers at the time, was trying to figure it all out.

Ron and I moved to Maryland before moving to Simsbury in 1995 and joining St Mary's. I had been teaching Religious Education in Maryland as I was interested in learning more about my faith. I continued to teach here at St. Mary's for 18 years and have been involved in various children/youth ministry activities through the years.

My faith has grown incredibly since 1991 and I feel truly blessed. I regularly rely on my faith for love, support, guidance, and a chance to express my gratitude. I have regular conversations with our Lord and love being part of our faith community. I reflect on my life before church; a life that felt a lot lonelier and lacked the faith, hope, and love that I experience as a Catholic. It is truly special to me that I know the difference. I remember feeling so pure and bright just after being baptized.

My parents and my sister have also found comfort and blessings through their faith. It has been difficult to lose a brother and watch my parents live through the loss of a son. However, we have each been blessed by the BIGGER picture. My brother's death has allowed my family to share in something so incredible and

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rather to look at all the blessings that God provides.