

I was born on December 1, 1964 in Tampa, FL, the youngest of seven children. My mom and dad made a lot of sacrifices to of their children through Catholic school;. By the time I was born, my dad was in semi-retirement as a security guard in Tampa, having left his job as chief of production control at the Rocky Mountain Missile Testing Laboratory in Colorado for health reasons. Mom worked at Maas Brothers selling cosmetics. Thus, we were obviously not loaded with money!

Dad was a serious disciplinarian when my older brothers and sisters were younger, but with his health issues, he probably didn't have a whole lot of extra spankings to go around for me, considering the time in which we lived. I was a small child when the social fabric around us was coming apart at the seams. One of my brothers was in high school from 1968 to 1972 (God bless him!), which led to a significant amount of conflict in our home. He and our dad were "at it" quite a bit, so my youngest years were full of loud arguments, many of which occurred while I was laying in bed and not yet asleep. My dad was very much aware that my brother was smoking pot and probably using other drugs, which was probably the cause of a lot of the fights. I experienced a great deal of anxiety in these tender years from 4 to 8 years old and was honestly terrified of my father.

Our home life only calmed down a little after that brother moved out in 1972, since my next oldest sister followed in his footsteps, and the whole cycle of rebellion and arguing continued on a regular basis. During a vacation up the East Coast and over to Delphos, Ohio (the town of Dad's birth), several significant things occurred. First, my dad had a stroke, and second, the idea of our family moving to Ohio first leaped into our minds. Dad told us to "shut up" about it, apparently initially resistant to the idea. However, it was not a long time after that vacation that Mom and Dad decided to move back to Delphos. This was probably motivated in great part by the desire to get my brother Tim (the next oldest) and me away from the corrupting influences of the disaster that had befallen our next two older siblings. Mom and Dad probably reasoned that the drug culture would probably not be as prevalent in Delphos as it had been in Tampa.

Fortunately for me, Dad sat Tim down after the move and told him something along the lines of: "Tim, I know you've been smoking pot. I know who you've been doing it with and where you've been doing it. You need to decide now to stop doing it and protect your little brother from going down that road." Tim, to his great credit, said, "Dad, I'll never do it again"—and he never did! One time, Tim came home from a wedding (I think he was in 8th grade) completely drunk, with his suit ruined from falling down numerous times in the mud. Dad told him to go upstairs, clean up and go to bed. The next day, Dad talked with Tim who said, "Dad, I'll never do it again!—and he never did!

This was immensely helpful to me, because, as my life was to show in a few years, I was very much prone to addiction. I would have probably been the worst one in the family if I had started down the path of drug use. Tim was far from a Saint, but as he became a 6'6" weight-lifting colossus and basketball star, he had a reputation for his commitment to not drinking, smoking or doing drugs. Since I admired him more than anyone on the face of the Earth, I followed in his footsteps. I never took even a sip of beer, smoked a single cigarette or experimented with any drugs whatsoever through my high school years. In fact, I never drank alcohol at all until I was 21.

I was Confirmed in 6th grade, and I can honestly say that I was excited about it. I remember our Confirmation preparation inspiring me to expect God to act in my life in a powerful way. I believed that what happened to the Apostles at Pentecost would happen to me. I recall how I said to myself on the way to the church for Confirmation, "My life is going to change today!" I was disappointed that I felt nothing whatsoever when I received the sacrament, and went on living the same after it as I had lived before it.

I think it was over the next summer that Mom and Dad amazingly sent Tim and me on two vacations: one trip to La Crosse, Wisconsin to visit our sister Alyce and her family, and one to Auburn, New York to visit our brother Don and his wife. During our visit to Auburn, Don shared the story of his conversion to Christ and how he had been filled with the Holy Spirit and even spoke in tongues. This excited me a great deal, especially after my post-Confirmation disappointment. He prayed with us to be filled with the Holy Spirit and encouraged us to keep praying for God to give us that experience. I kept at it for a week or two, but never had any real experience of God that I could recognize, so I eventually stopped praying for that gift.

With all of this, one may think that I was a devout kid and something of goody-two-shoes, but that was unfortunately not the case. I cussed more than probably anybody I knew, and did not particularly participate in the Mass. Our family life was not significantly devout, though we attended Catholic school and weekly Mass. We never prayed together, except for occasional prayers before meals.

I was not popular at school, and in 8th grade, I was positively terrorized by a bully who made my life miserable. For some reason, I never told my parents, my brother Tim (who would have broken the guy in half) or my teachers. This daily experience of terror left a significant scar on me that would take years to overcome. It planted a strong seed of hatred in my heart that would come to full blossom in my junior year of high school. I can state without any doubt that my 8th grade year at school was the worst year of my life to date.

In my freshman year, I had a religion teacher who had us read *The Cross and the Switchblade*, by David Wilkerson. In that book, he described how Jesus Christ had changed the lives of violent gang members and how they had been filled with the Holy Spirit. There it was again! It intrigued me and stirred my heart again in that direction. My attention during religion class was on the girl I had had a crush on since 6th grade, who surprised me by enjoying talking with me. Thus, I missed half of what was being said, and hardened myself to the message he was teaching us by taking on a "cool" posture.

Also, unfortunately, it was around this time that my insecurity about being "normal" actually encouraged me to delve into movies and magazines that were less than wholesome. Ultimately, this became an addiction, and was aided in it by my parents giving me a 24" TV with cable (complete with "The Movie Channel"). This narcissistic form of self-indulgence fed my deeper and deeper retreat into myself. Also, it created an absurdly unrealistic view of what a woman should look like, and how a woman's existence was about giving me pleasure. It was only natural that I should embrace weight-lifting at that time as a part of an obsessive focus on my appearance, which was marred by the onset of severe acne.

I was a mediocre student, partly because my parents never “sat” on me like I now wish they had. I never did any homework that I can recall, and spent most of my time watching TV, playing basketball (I was a tremendous shooter, but not much of a player), reading voraciously and studying chess. This annoyed my parents a great deal, since I had a pretty high IQ, but they probably felt that since I was really no trouble in other ways, they were relatively happy with me overall.

At this time, as one might imagine, my faith in Christ waned. I never doubted the existence of God, but the person of Jesus Christ seemed to me to be irrelevant. I couldn’t understand how he made any difference in my life and I wanted nothing to do with his teachings on sexual morality. In this, I was like the philosopher (Voltaire?) who said that he didn’t WANT Christianity to be true because of its moral demands. My philosophy conveniently served my desire to do as I pleased.

Upon graduation from high school, I suddenly gave up weight lifting. I felt like the pressure was off, and I was ready to stop posturing, pretending to “be something” for the approval of those around me. I went to the University of Toledo with my best friend, Jay, who was my roommate. Away from home, I never attended Mass, preferring my sleep, and glad to be away from the pressure to attend something I believed to be irrelevant and probably untrue.

One of my friends, John, was something of an anomaly to me. He was very funny and I enjoyed his company a great deal, but he told me that he was planning to remain a virgin until marriage. I tried to argue him out of his position by one of the stupidest notions I’ve ever tried to foist on another human being: “Don’t you want to avoid looking stupid on your wedding night?” He came back to me the next day with the obvious response that if the woman really loved him, she would be fine with that and they would be able to figure things out! Wise man!

This answer blew me away, as did John’s point of view. Somehow, and now I know it had to be God’s grace working in a particularly powerful way, I embraced John’s point of view for myself. I could hardly have called myself a virgin in the fullest sense of the word at that point, but I was in the rigid technical sense. I decided to stay that way until marriage. Just as remarkable—stunning, even, if you knew the depth of my addiction—I threw away all of my Playboy magazines.

Please note that this was not about religion or God at this point. I had just utterly rejected the “religion” of modern society (that life was all about sex, and that marriage was unnecessary for it), tearing down the “altar” of my “god” by throwing out my magazines, but without any conscious reference to God or Christianity. I look back on this as being something of a miracle.

Not long after that, I went home for Spring Break. My brother Tim surprised me by coming home that weekend too. The first evening we were home, he sat Mom, Dad and me down and started speaking to us: “Mom, Dad, Steve, I wanted to share this with you because I love you. I’ve decided to no longer live for myself, but for Jesus Christ!” When I heard those words, I knew that that was what I was looking for. Everything that had been happening to me in the previous month was leading me back to Christ and to his Church. That evening, I committed my life to Jesus Christ, telling him that I wanted to live for him and asking him to forgive my sins.

The next day, Tim and I went to a bookstore and we selected a Bible for my new journey with Christ. It was a New International Version, which was (and still is) a very popular Protestant translation, and was my lifeline for a long time to come. I began reading it voraciously, hours a day (to the neglect of my studies, but I was already neglecting them, so it wasn't a big change for the worse in that regard). Unlike many other people who read the Bible that much, I had more problems with what I read than blessings. The Jesus I read about seemed to be different than the way I understood him to be as a child. He said things like, "who touched me?" How could the Second Person of the Trinity say that?

The cynicism I had had about my faith in high school turned into a strange combination of faith, doubt and intense struggle after my conversion. For the first time in my life, I actually doubted the existence of God! I doubted every tenet of the Catholic faith, and found no answers by asking the help of the priest who was in charge of campus ministry there. That particular priest didn't even believe in the things I was asking him about, and left me even more confused than before.

I encountered a Jehovah's Witness, who gave me a book that denied the divinity of Jesus. I tore the book up and threw it away, but the seeds of that doubt were planted. I was at that point insecure about everything having to do with my faith. There was no safe ground for me. This would not have been a big deal a few months before, when I could have said, "Fine, I'll go elsewhere!" For some reason I could not give up on Jesus Christ, true God and true man, so I continued on through my intense turmoil.

At that time, when reading 1 Corinthians, chapters 12 through 14, I recalled my conversation with my brother Don in Auburn. St. Paul talked about spiritual gifts, like tongues (a language unknown to the speaker, given by the Holy Spirit), prophecy, healing and others as if they were a normal part of the life of a believer in Christ. Here, I thought, was the answer. If I could experience the Holy Spirit's power, my doubts would all disappear!

I wrote a letter to Don, telling him about my odyssey, and asking about the gifts of the Holy Spirit. He replied by saying that the gifts were real, that they were available to me and that I needed to repent of my sins, give my life to Jesus Christ and ask him to fill me with the Holy Spirit. Immediately, I did the things Don suggested and . . . nothing happened! He recommended some books that he thought might help: Power in Praise, Nine O' Clock in the Morning and How to Live Like a King's Kid.

I transferred to Miami University to be with Tim in my quest for God and to share in the fellowship he'd found at Campus Crusade for Christ. I moved in with him and a friend of his in an off-campus house for some summer classes. Tim and I were on one and the same quest for an experiential relationship with. We bought and read the books Don recommended, but nothing was happening in my heart, and neither of us could speak in tongues, which we were confident God wanted us to be able to do.

One morning, Tim told me, "Steve, I prayed in tongues last night!" I said, "Do it for me!" He said, "No, read chapter 3 of Power in Praise!" Arrgh! I'd waited so long! "Okay, I'll do it!" Nothing else existed for me the rest of the day but that book until I read up to the end of that chapter. The author gave the same advice as my brother Don had, except he said that we should ask for the gift of tongues and then begin speaking whatever syllables came to our mouths. Sounded weird, and embarrassing, but I was willing to give it a try. After a while, I was certainly saying a bunch of syllables pretty fluently, but felt

nothing whatsoever in my heart where I most desperately wanted to have God touch me. I did it for perhaps an hour and Tim came home. I reported that I had also prayed in tongues. He said, "Do it for me!" I said, "What? You wouldn't do it for me and you want me to do it for you?" He said that he wanted to hear if it sounded the same as his did and didn't want to prejudice it by doing it for me. That sounded reasonable, so I did it. He said, "Steve, it sounds the same as mine!" That was a real breakthrough for me. I was convinced that it was legitimate, and that we were actually speaking in a language given by the Holy Spirit himself. I knew that now anything was possible.

I struggled with doubts, strange ideas that afflicted me and recurring struggles in the area of sexual purity. I was in real turmoil, and had nowhere to run from it. It is impossible to leave your own mind, unless you're willing to take drugs or get drunk, which I was not even tempted to do. Thus I was deeply miserable, and was hardly a poster child for a new convert to Christ.

Also, I was almost completely a Protestant by this point. All the books I'd read were by Protestants, and gave a very negative view of the Catholic Church. The problem for me was that everybody had a different point of view about the Bible and I could not see any compelling reason to believe one teacher over another, aside from how powerful a person's ministry appeared to be. This added to my confusion.

Tim and I went to a Catholic Charismatic conference in Toledo, Ohio called "The Holy Toledo" conference. There we finally experienced what it was like to worship with over 1,000 people who sang in tongues and raised their hands, worshiping God with great love and devotion. This was what we'd been after all along. I even saw my freshman religion teachers there! Fr. Michael Scanlan, president of the Franciscan University of Steubenville, spoke about the amazing work of the Holy Spirit at his university, about the Masses with standing room only, about long lines of college kids waiting to go to confession. It stirred our hearts to an immediate decision to transfer there. Tim and I were on a quest for God and nothing was going to hold us back from going where we could find him on a deeper level. We both pushed to transfer to Steubenville for the spring semester of 1984, just a little over a month away.

Over Christmas break, I was alone with Mom and Dad and my inner turmoil. I was full of doubts and questions. The most pressing one was: "There are thousands of churches claiming to preach the word of God accurately, but they all contradicted one another at one level or another. How can I know who—if anybody—is right? Suddenly, one evening, the insight exploded into my mind that the Catholic Church was the original Church founded by Jesus Christ. If anybody was right about matters like what to believe about the Eucharist, it must be the Catholic Church! Somehow, it all became clear to me that all the other churches were offshoots from the Catholic Church, and that the only one that had a legitimate claim to have preserved the teachings of Jesus and interpreted them correctly was the Catholic Church. Everybody else claimed the authority of the Holy Spirit, but how could anybody know who was hearing accurately from God when everybody was making the same claim?

This was, quite simply, a massive earthquake in my understanding of my faith. Here was finally something that made sense, and I had an intense need for things to make sense! By God's design, when

Tim and I arrived at the University of Steubenville, I was a convinced, committed Catholic for the first time in years.

Life in Steubenville was like nothing else I had ever known. The feeling of isolation and my unpopularity disappeared fairly quickly as I joined a “household,” which was something of a Christian fraternity and began hanging out with some devout Catholics who were serious about following Jesus Christ with all their hearts. The inner turmoil had not gone away completely, but had diminished to a great extent. I changed my major from Chemistry to Theology, and began to be a serious student for the first time in my life (getting on the Dean's list right away).

A crucial turning point for me was the day I was listening to a tape by Brennan Manning. He described how when he was praying alone in a cave in Spain, looking at a crucifix and was struck by what Jesus had done for him. He said, “Jesus, are you crazy? Are you out of your mind? Why would you do that for me?” The Holy Spirit pierced my heart at that moment with the Love of God for ME. I had the image of the vastness of the universe being not even an atom before God, and that God had chosen to become a man on a tiny little planet in that vast universe in order to save ME. I was THAT valuable to God! My heart was filled with God’s love in an intense way, so much so that I could hardly stand the pleasure. This one experience totally changed my point of view about my self and about Jesus. Jesus loved ME just as I was, with all my hang ups, my struggles with sin, my weaknesses and my foolishness. From that point on, my faith was rooted in a profound sense of God’s infinite love for me and for all people. This changed my life dramatically.

From that point on, I, Steve Kroeger, the guy who had never experienced God’s touch in a way that I could really know it beyond doubt, began to experience the power of the Holy Spirit in my life in an ongoing basis—and sometimes very powerfully. More and more, I became convinced that God truly is Love, that he loved me so much that he sent his Son Jesus to save me from my sins, and that he had filled me with his Holy Spirit. God was no longer an intellectual concept, one that I had to infer rationally from observing the world around me. I was in love with a Person, and that Person’s name was and is Jesus, the Son of God and the savior of the world. I've loved him ever since.

Experiencing a perfect, unconditional love like that changed my life from one that was fear-based to one that was rooted in an immense confidence in God’s love for me. This enabled me to love other people far more easily, without seeking to “get something” from them or even to receive any reward whatsoever. God’s love also put me on the path to an increasing freedom from sinful behaviors that had bound me for so many years. After the initial very rocky and difficult time following my conversion, God gave me an abiding peace and joy that are together like a lamp in my heart every day of my life—even when life is extremely difficult on the surface.

My prayer is that all people will come one day to experience the life-changing power of Jesus Christ and come to live in the presence and power of the Holy Spirit, and so discover for themselves the peace, joy and freedom that God offers to those who live in his love!