

Insights From a New Catholic

By James Rutenbeck



The author with his son Anthony

Sixteen years ago my wife Marianne and I sat before a psychologist in a grim, fluorescent-lit office. Our son Anthony was five years old, and though he had once spoken a bit, he hadn't uttered a word in three years, and the clinician offered little hope. She told us that Anthony had pervasive development disorder (autism) and the mental age of an 18-month-old. She said she could predict nothing about his future progress.

Marianne is the most optimistic person I know, but, like me, she was devastated. It felt as though our son's very humanity had been stripped from him; that his potential and future had been negated. I was not a religious person, but I railed at God in anger. Why would a supposedly loving creator allow an innocent child to be so disabled? (Anthony wasn't the world's first disabled person, but in my narrow vision, it felt that way).

Lord, You are near

My tortured nights took an inexplicable turn that I would later understand when I read Psalm 145:18: "You, Lord, are near to all who call upon you, to all who call upon you in truth."

Vaguely aware of a Catholic mystical tradition, I called parishes in Newton, Massachusetts, where we lived. When I reached St. Ignatius of Loyola parish, a Jesuit parish on the Boston College campus, I talked with pastor Fr. Bob VerEecke, SJ, who invited me to visit their Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults (RCIA) group.

Raised a Protestant in a small Iowa town, I faltered as I climbed the church steps, recalling childhood stories about exotic Catholic practice. Before long though, I started attending Mass and began to experience unexpectedly deep feelings, a desire to kneel and pray, to engage with the liturgy, even fighting the urge to lie prostrate before the altar.

Dubbed Doubting Thomas

My heart was headed in one direction; my head in another. I was dubbed "Doubting Thomas" by the RCIA group but stayed with it for two years. Fr. Bob was there every week, speaking in a personal way about Catholic teachings of compassion and regard for the dignity of each person and many other things, but the idea of the value of every life was what resonated for me.

At confirmation rehearsal before the Easter Vigil, I darted between the row of catechumens and the empty pews on the other side of the aisle, still uncertain about my commitment. As I was leaving that night, Fr. Bob took me aside and whispered firmly, "Stop resisting." Fr. Bob knew what I was desperate to

Poem for Liza and Matt ~

*How does love grow among cold winds and leaden hearts?
How does love soar among faceless crowds that cringe at life?
How can love sing in a world so weak and cowardly?*

*I know how love can climb inside one's bones because I can feel it.
I know how love can heal a soul because I've seen icy stares go warm.
I know how love can cure what's yearned for with faith and abandon.*

*Mysteries are solved when all the clues connect.
In love, give your smiling eyes to another and he will sing back to you.*

—Anthony Rutenbeck

hear — permission to stop over-thinking and simply follow my instincts.

First steps

I had spent two years watching others participate in liturgy. On Good Friday, I was finally able to make my own way to the altar during the Veneration of the Cross. As I knelt and kissed the cross, the symbolic act caught me in its grip, inexplicably stirring my heart. I marveled at how a physical object could transport me in such a profound way. But when later on I tried to explain it to my RCIA group, I was tongue-tied.

Anthony graduated from high school and just celebrated his 21st birthday. He "speaks" with an iPad. The first non-verbal student to pass the state's rigorous mandatory math exam, he aced honors physics and had poems published in the school's literary magazine. He's a part-time college student and wants to be a writer. Anthony's writing is terse and insightful, sometimes beautiful to the point of painful.

Our daughter Liza was married in October. She asked her brother to write a poem for the ceremony. In few words

Anthony describes a spiritual journey, one that he's taken with courage on his own terms.

There were times when I felt almost unbearable pain when I walked Anthony into his elementary school, imagining how difficult his life must be. But then I glanced over and saw a person who was dealing with a serious disability as best as he could, as any human being would, who took what fate had handed him and moved on. He was happy with his life. My grief for Anthony was real, but it was my grief — not his. I had prayed for Anthony to be healed, but as Fr. Bob once told me, the person who prays for healing of another is often the one who is healed.

James Rutenbeck's films have been screened internationally. His editing credits include the Emmy-award winning Siamese Twins for NOVA and God in America for Frontline. His film Scenes from a Parish is now available as a Faith-Sharing Edition DVD with study guide for parish ministries. www.scenesfromaparish.com. He is an active member of St. Ignatius parish in Chestnut Hill, Massachusetts.



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