A conversion that keeps on coming

In its section on the Easter Vigil, the Roman Missal quotes St. Augustine as saying the liturgy is the “mother of all vigils.” The Church also refers to it as the “greatest and most noble of all solemnities.” And while I have no reason to doubt the good Doctor of the Church or our current Missal, I can’t affirm these theories with any certainty.

There are many holes in my Catholic experiences, but one of the gaps I most regret is that I have attended only one Easter Vigil, and my memory from that night a dozen years ago is foggy at best. I don’t remember most of the details of the liturgy – what the readings were or what our priest said during the homily.

I do remember the warmth of the fire that lit the paschal candle. I remember the beauty of the dark church illuminated only by the hundreds of individual flickering flames that filled the pews.

I remember the nervousness I felt. I remember the smell of the chrism oil on my forehead. I remember my then-3-year-old daughter piercing the silence of the Church, running toward me, arms open, screaming, “Daddy’s Catholic!” as I headed back to the pew.

I remember a strong sense of satisfaction – even completion. After a lifetime of wandering in and out of various faiths – and no faith at all – Daddy’s Catholic. Conversion over. Finally.

But truly, that was the beginning of my conversion, not the end. I wish I had come to the decision to become Catholic out of a desperate love for the Church and its teachings, because I longed to experience the mercy of Christ in the Eucharist

and in the confessional, but that wasn't the case.

No, I longed to have my tremendously faithful wife have a husband of whom she could be proud. I longed to have her stop asking when I was going to fulfill the promise I made to her to convert. I longed to stave off the inevitable questions from my devout 3-year-old about why Daddy wasn't taking Communion.

While the paperwork on my conversion was complete that night 12 years ago, my head and my heart are still trying to catch up, because conversion isn't an event that ends with chrism oil and cake and punch and congratulations; it is a lifelong journey of trying to get to the point where we echo Christ's words to his Father: "Not my will but yours be done" (Lk 22:42).

Easy for him to say.

For me – for most of us, probably – falling in love with Christ and his Church is a process that is full of joy and frustration and, often, a tremendous sense of feeling overwhelmed. Trying to consume and digest 2,000 years of Church teaching can be daunting. The Bible is thick. So is the Catechism (not to mention the thousands of papal exhortations, letters, encyclicals, etc.). But the journey is long. There is time.

Conversion isn't like flipping on a light switch. No, conversion is like the fire that ignites the paschal candle at the Easter Vigil; it starts with a single spark and an invitation for Christ to set your heart ablaze. Conversion is tending to that flame of faith – to fan it – through prayer, through obedience, through reading and charity and love. And soon the fire that burns from within will illuminate all the dark corners of our lives.

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