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**Editor's Note:** This article is based largely on Matt Gaspers' talk at the 2019 CFN Conference, "Journey from the New to the Old Mass," which is available in full on CFN's YouTube channel. In view of the upcoming [World Youth Day in Lisbon](#) (Aug. 1-6, 2023), Mr. Gaspers shares relevant excerpts from his 2019 conference talk, together with some additional material.

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Twenty-one years ago this month, I attended World Youth Day 2002 in Toronto. At the time, I was 17 years old and still dreaming of becoming a rock star one day (more on that later). Back then, sadly, I was much more concerned with the success of my band than with the salvation of my soul (and much less in pursuing a life of sanctity).

When I reflect on how far Our Lord has brought me since my teenage days, the following words of the great St. Augustine come to mind: "Late have I loved Thee, O Beauty ever ancient, ever new!"<sup>[1]</sup> In this quote from his famous *Confessions*, Augustine was addressing God Himself, but it seems to me that his words can be applied in an analogous way to the Church's liturgy and faith, both of which are "ever ancient" in their sources (namely, Scripture and Tradition) and "ever new" in their ability to convey the truth, beauty, and goodness of God to all men of all time.

My hope is that by sharing my conversion story, I will impart some measure of encouragement and hope to readers, especially those of you who may have family members or friends who are currently far from God or perhaps are not very interested in learning about Catholic Tradition. I assure you that if God can reach me, there is hope for everyone!

## **Cradle Catholic Upbringing**

As you've probably gathered by now, I was not raised with the Traditional Latin Mass, although I was born to Catholic parents who take our Faith seriously. Both of my parents grew up in rural Nebraska as cradle Catholics and their history prior to meeting one another attests to their sincere commitment to God and His Church. After graduating high school in 1964, my father entered the seminary for the Missionary Society of St. Columban (also known as the Columban Fathers) and remained in formation through the spring of 1971, when he left after discerning that his vocation lay elsewhere. My mother, who

graduated in 1969, entered the Marian Sisters of the Diocese of Lincoln, an order rooted in Franciscan spirituality and which remains devoted to the apostolates of teaching and nursing to this day. Like my dad, however, my mom eventually realized that Our Lord had a different plan for her life, and she ended up leaving the convent in 1979 after conferring with Bishop Glennon Patrick Flavin (her local Ordinary at the time) and obtaining his permission.

I've asked my parents on occasion what they remember about Vatican II and their experience of the changes to the Mass following the Council. As a seminarian, my dad recalls that sometime in 1966 (the year after the Council closed), the priests at his seminary began offering the Mass *versus populum* ("towards the people") and in the vernacular. My mom was still in high school when the changes started happening, but her recollections are similar in that she doesn't remember much explanation being given regarding *why* such changes were being introduced. As some of you no doubt recall, the mentality of the average Catholic in the 1950s and '60s was that if Father said or did something (apart from blatant sin, of course), or if something came from Rome or the local bishop, then it must be alright. This was how my parents were raised, and it remained their honest assumption concerning the liturgical changes following the Council.

Liturgical novelties aside, my parents nevertheless adhered to the basic truths of the Faith they had learned prior to the Council and strove to raise their children accordingly. My two older sisters and I were taught, for example, that the Blessed Sacrament really is the Body and Blood of Christ (when many Catholics had lost their faith in transubstantiation and the Real Presence), and that in order to receive Holy Communion worthily one must be in a state of grace (hence, they took us to Confession). We attended Mass every Sunday and holy day of obligation as a family, prayed together in the evening before bed, and were involved at our local parish all throughout my childhood.

In short, my parents raised my sisters and me to be faithful, practicing Catholics to the best of their knowledge and ability. Unfortunately, however, as we read in St. Peter's First Epistle, our "adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, goeth about seeking whom he may devour" (1 Pet. 5:8), and the evil one eventually found that rock music would be an effective means of drawing me away from the narrow gate and straight path "that leadeth to life" and onto the broad way "that leadeth to destruction" (Matt. 7:14, 13). However, as I will relate, what the devil intended for evil, God ultimately used for good and as a means for my conversion.

## The Allure of the World

After being named editor of *Catholic Family News* in mid-2017, I related in my introduction to readers how John Vennari and I shared quite a bit in common despite our difference in age.<sup>[2]</sup> Many of you probably remember that John had a great love and talent for music — and also, that as a young man he played guitar in a rock band. The same is true for myself. Both of my parents are very musical and when I was around 11 or 12 years of age, I expressed an interest in taking drum lessons as well as learning the basics of playing the guitar from my dad. I was also very interested in sports, but it wasn't long before my desire to become a famous musician far surpassed my dreams of athletic fame.

During my teenage years, much to the concern of my parents, I became engrossed in rock music to the point of having a cassette tape and CD collection — in the late '90s and early 2000s — of bands like Led Zeppelin, Van Halen, Metallica, Mötley Crüe, and dozens of other heavy metal groups who had their heydays in the 1970s and '80s. Not only did I want to sound like those groups in how I played the guitar and sang (and I often practiced two or three hours a day to do so), I also wanted to look like them, which meant growing out my hair (about half-way down my back, eventually) and wearing ripped t-shirts and jeans. Later on, I even bought a black leather biker jacket, which I proudly wore to school, looking like I belonged in a 1980s film or music video.

Around the age of 13 or so, I started a band with some of my friends and dreamed of one day “making it big”. At first, I'm sure my parents were hoping it was just a phase through which I would pass relatively quickly, while at the same time trying to be supportive of my talents and pursuits. My mom, in particular, tried for years to get me interested in contemporary Christian music as a more wholesome alternative. However, my band continued, in one form or another, over the next four years and became, in many ways, the center of my life. (We typically practiced every Friday and Saturday night, most often in my parents' basement. Our poor neighbors were very patient with the weekly noise pollution!). By the time my bandmates and I were 16 or 17, we were already talking about moving to California together after high school and breaking onto the music scene. None of us had any interest in pursuing a college education; instead, we were set on devoting our time, energy, and resources to “making it big.”

## Rescued by the Good Shepherd

Needless to say, this state of affairs was increasingly disturbing for my poor parents. Although I continued to attend Sunday Mass with them and eventually got involved with the parish youth group, they could see that the path I was on would only lead me away from God

and, ultimately, into utter darkness and eternal ruin. It was time for an intervention, and it took the form of my mom really pushing for me to attend World Youth Day 2002 in Toronto (held during the summer between my junior and senior year of high school). She firmly believed — or, as St. Paul wrote of Abraham, “against hope believed in hope” (Rom. 4:18) — that if I attended that event, something good would come out of it and, God willing, would change the direction of my life, and she was right.

Now, before I go on, a brief disclaimer: Knowing what I do now about the “profane novelties” (1 Tim. 6:20) that have invaded Holy Mother Church, and which are very much on display at World Youth Day, I certainly do not endorse the event and would not send my own children. After attending the event myself, and knowing what I do now about traditional Catholic standards of piety and modesty (among other things), I must concur with John Vennari, who wrote in 2005 (reflecting on WYD 2002, which he attended in order to document):

“... World Youth Day was primarily a rock ‘n’ roll festival, pervaded by the superstition that today’s young people are the first generation in Church history that are incapable of knowing and practicing the Catholic piety of the centuries.”[\[3\]](#)

In my mother’s defense, she really knew very little about the event and what all goes on there. What she did know is that the Pope would be there and that I’d be spending a week with other young Catholics, which she fervently hoped would impact me in a profound way. (Providentially, and unbeknownst to me at the time, John was also at WYD Toronto in 2002, documenting all of the liturgical, catechetical, and other kinds of aberrations. He describes them at length in a book co-authored with Cornelia Ferreira called [World Youth Day: From Catholicism to Counterchurch](#).) That being said, I hope we all recognize the fact that God *can* and *does* bring good out of evil — not that He positively wills sin, of course, but that He is able to draw good out of it (the Cross is the prime example) — and that is precisely what He did for me at World Youth Day, despite all of the event’s serious problems.

So, back to my story, I ended up going to WYD Toronto in July of 2002 with my parish youth group. The youth group leader, a very talented musician and songwriter himself, had taken me “under his wing” in the months leading up to our trip. I’m sure he knew about my parents’ concern regarding my band and general trajectory in life, so he made an effort to get me interested in using my musical talents for Our Lord. This same man also happened to be a longtime friend and musical collaborator with a guy named [Tony Melendez](#), who was born without arms in Nicaragua (a result of the prenatal drug thalidomide) but who ended

up becoming a well-known Catholic musician and songwriter. (He plays the guitar with his feet and was able to perform for Pope John Paul II in 1987, which essentially launched his career.)

Tony was one of the big-name performers at World Youth Day the year I attended and he had asked my youth group leader, Pat, to perform with him. Long story short, Pat convinced Tony to let me be their drummer for the week, and thus I ended up playing on the main stage at World Youth Day in front of literally tens of thousands of people, the very thing I dreamed of doing.



Left: Matt Gaspers with Tony Melendez at WYD 2002. Right: Gaspers backstage with three well-known Catholic musicians (from the left): Matt Maher, Steve Angrisano, and Tom Booth.

We read in the Book of Psalms, “Delight in the Lord, and He will give thee the requests of thy heart” (Ps. 36[37]:4). The experience of performing at World Youth Day was God’s way, I believe, of making these words a living reality for me. Without hearing an audible voice, I



sensed Him speaking very clearly, telling me that His love and His plan for my life were infinitely greater than anything I could hope to accomplish on my own. To quote St. Augustine once again, “Thou hast made us for Thyself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in Thee.”<sup>[4]</sup> And Our Lord tells us in the Gospel, “I am the good Shepherd: and I know Mine, and mine know Me” (John 10:14). The Good Shepherd had gone in search of His lost sheep (cf. Luke 15:1-7), and by His grace I able to recognize His voice.

In addition to granting me consolation in Him, though, Our Lord made it equally clear to me that the time had come to make a choice: Was I going to follow Him, the Good Shepherd, and surrender to His will for my life or not? Practically speaking, I knew that continuing with my band and playing such wicked music was not an option if I wanted to follow Our Lord. “Know you not,” asks St. James rhetorically in his Epistle, “that the friendship of this world is the enemy of God?” (Jam. 4:4). Thus, with the help of God’s grace, one of the first things I did after returning home from World Youth Day was to sit down with my bandmates and tell them I had to quit. Needless to say, they were shocked (and even a bit emotional, much to my surprise), but I was determined to cooperate with the graces I had received and “put on the new man,” as St. Paul says, “who according to God is created in justice and holiness of truth” (Eph. 4:24).

## New Beginning: A Thirst for Truth

It was at this point in my life — age 17 and going into my senior year of high school — that Our Lord began to lead me in the direction of Tradition, slowly at first, but steadily nonetheless. You might say it was the beginning of my post-baptismal conversion and re-entrance into the Purgative Way, the first of the three stages in the spiritual life, which of course begins at Baptism. Fr. Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, the renowned Dominican theologian (d. 1964), sums up the radical transition I experienced so well in his book, *The Three Conversions in the Spiritual Life*:

“We are thus able to appreciate something of the importance of true conversion, by which a man passes from the state of mortal sin to the state of grace. ... The state of sin was a state of spiritual death; a state in which, more or less consciously, he made himself the center of all his activities and the end of all his desires; in which he was actually the slave of everything, the slave of his passions, of the spirit of the world, of the spirit of evil. The state of grace, on the other hand, is a state of life in which man begins seriously to tend beyond himself and to make God the center of his activities, loving God more than himself. The state of grace is entrance into the kingdom of God, where the docile soul begins

to reign with God over its own passions, over the spirit of the world and the spirit of evil.”[\[5\]](#)

In the words of St. Paul:

“And you, when you were dead in your offences, and sins, wherein in time past you walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of this air, of the spirit that now worketh on the children of unbelief: In which also we all conversed in time past, in the desires of our flesh, fulfilling the will of the flesh and of our thoughts, and were by nature children of wrath, even as the rest: But God, Who is rich in mercy, for His exceeding charity wherewith He loved us, even when we were dead in sins, hath quickened us together in Christ, (by whose grace you are saved,) and hath raised us up together, and hath made us sit together in the heavenly places, through Christ Jesus.” (Eph. 2:1-6)

With the desire for rock-n-roll fame behind me, I started my senior year realizing I needed a new post-graduation plan, so for the first time I started getting serious about going to college. I also started spending a lot less time with my former bandmates and a lot more time with friends from the youth group who were likewise hungry to grow spiritually. I can’t recall exactly, but I think it was during my senior year that another youth group leader from the parish started a small-group study on apologetics, the branch of theology focused on giving a systematic explanation and defense of the Faith. It was really the first time I can recall being shown the many Scriptural proofs for Catholic doctrine — in other words, that the Bible is a Catholic book! It was also my first introduction to the early Church Fathers, which proved to be pivotal in my journey towards the Traditional Mass.

A few years later, sometime in 2005, I attended the Traditional Latin Mass for the first time and the rest, as they say, is history. I must note, though, that reading *Catholic Family News* (I was first introduced in late 2003 or early 2004) and learning about Our Lady’s Fatima Message from The Fatima Center (around the same time) likewise play a pivotal role in my journey. Thus, I will be eternally grateful to John Vennari (RIP) and Fr. Nicholas Gruner (RIP), both of whom profoundly impacted me.

## Problems with World Youth Day

Although attending WYD 2002 did play a role in pulling me off the broad way that leads to destruction (cf. Matt. 7:13), I must concur with John Vennari:

"I would never allow my children to attend World Youth Day. Why would a Catholic parent want his son or daughter to attend an event that makes the Barque of Peter look like a Civilization-of-Love Boat? Nor would I allow my children to attend the World Youth Day Papal Mass. It is a source of scandal because of what young people are implicitly taught at this Papal Mass. ...

The young people are taught at World Youth Day that there is nothing wrong with immodest dress, or slovenly and immodest dress during Mass — again, in defiance of traditional papal teaching on the subject. ...

Thus, World Youth Day delivers a counterfeit, emotional, pep-rally religion. Its ceremonies contain countless novelties, practices and sacrileges that have been condemned by the constant teaching and practice of the popes throughout the centuries. WYD is a scandal to our young people." [6]

Here is Cardinal-elect Américo Manuel Alves Aguiar, auxiliary bishop of Lisbon and chief organizer of [@wyd\\_en](#) 2023, saying:

"We don't want to convert young people to Christ or to the Catholic Church or anything like that." [#WYD2023](#) <https://t.co/MbsJvVrZhE>

— Matt Gaspers (@MattGaspers) [July 9, 2023](#)

So, [@wyd\\_en](#) organizers are apparently encouraging participants to visit a synagogue, mosques, and a Hindu temple in Lisbon. A "Tree Planting for Religions" ceremony will also take place.

A prime example of the problematic nature of World Youth Day.  
<https://t.co/vJuDd5V1QQ>

— Matt Gaspers (@MattGaspers) [July 31, 2023](#)



## Fatima is the Answer

Thankfully, the Mother of God appeared to three young children in 1917 and anticipated the “counterfeit, emotional, pep-rally religion” with a series of messages which constitute a catechism on the fundamentals of the true Faith. Between her six apparitions and the three of the Angel of Peace the previous year, we learn about:

- the supreme importance of believing, adoring, trusting, and loving God;
- the need to pray and make sacrifices for poor sinners;
- the profound reverence due to Our Lord in the Most Blessed Sacrament;
- the Four Last Things (Death, Judgment, Heaven, and Hell);
- the reality of Purgatory;
- the reality of Hell and the real danger of ending up there;
- reliance on our Blessed Mother as our “refuge and the way that will lead [us] to God” (Our Lady on June 13, 1917);
- the power and importance of the Holy Rosary, especially in our times;
- Our Lord’s desire to “lead all souls to Heaven, especially those most in need of [His] mercy” (Our Lady on July 13, 1917);
- the fact that God still works miracles of Biblical proportions today (i.e., the Miracle of the Sun);
- and so much more.

I am very pleased that representatives of The Fatima Center will be on the ground in Lisbon at WYD 2023 to hand out literature and hopefully reach many young souls with Our Lady’s Fatima Message. Let us pray that Our Lord will bless their efforts with great success, for it is truly missionary territory that they will be treading.

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[1] [Confessions Book X](#), Ch. 28.

[2] Matt Gaspers, “By God’s Grace, We Carry On: An Introduction from CFN’s New Editor,” *Catholic Family News*, Aug. 2017 issue.

[3] Cornelia R. Ferreira and John Vennari, [World Youth Day: From Catholicism to](#)

[\*Counterchurch\*](#) (Toronto: Canisius Books, 2005), p. 163.

[4] [\*Confessions Book I\*](#), Ch. 1.

[5] Fr. Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, O.P., *The Three Conversions in the Spiritual Life* (TAN Books and Publishers, Inc., 2002), pp. 16-17.

[6] Ferreira and Vennari, *op. cit.*, pp. 213-214. For details regarding what went on during the WYD 2002 Papal Mass, see pp. 210-212.