

THE FIREFIGHTER FINDS RELIGION IS IT ALL OVER AS A FIREFIGHTER?

During those drinking years and good times at musters and at the annual Firefighter's Ball, the young man began to do some serious thinking about his life and where it might leave him. Could he do this stuff forever? Firefighting was very rewarding and the friendships and brotherhood were fantastic. The bending of elbows was simply great, but could it last?

He was getting older and involved in just about everything one could think of in school and community besides being a firefighter. He was vice president of the local Boy's Club, was vice president of the teacher's union, chaired a number of school-related committees, chaired a school building committee, was appointed Communications Officer for the Fire Department and later became Captain of Ladder One.

However, there still seemed to be something missing in his life. His family was growing older with two kids in junior high school and one in elementary school. Just what was missing? Could it be that there was one aspect of the wholeness of body, mind, and spirit that was missing? Could it be that spiritual side?

Being a good "Catholic boy," he did attend Mass every weekend. However, he often wondered that if it were not for his wife, would he miss on occasion or even bother to go at all? There were those times when he sat in church thinking about how he was going to build his house. And there were those times when he was relieved when the fire alarm blew during the Mass and he was able to skip out. It was legal in his eyes to do so. Helping someone in trouble was more important

than just sitting there. One could be saving a life, and that was a good thing. But was he being called to something else?

He was reminded of the time when his son was in the hospital at only eighteen months old and the prognosis did not look good for his recovery. He had promised God that if he would heal his son, he would drive his mother and her friend to their favorite novena to St. Jude, which was in a church several miles out of town. He remembered that the doctor told him and his wife to go home and get some rest and that he would call them if the situation got worse. The firefighter/teacher made the promise on his way out to the car and when they got home, they received a phone call from the doctor to come pick up their son because the fever broke and there were no signs of any illness whatsoever. It appeared to be a miracle because the doctor couldn't explain the change that took place so quickly. One minute it looked as if there was no hope for the little guy and the next, the signs were gone and he was in perfect health.

Well, unlike the promise not to drink, this was one he had to keep and he did. It turned out that he not only drove them to the novena, he went inside and participated, and liked it. His own prayer was for him to be the best at whatever God wanted of him. Little did he know at the time that his mother and wife were praying for the same thing. Many years went by and a few voluntary drives to the novenas most likely led to the firefighter's questioning and a call to return to a deeper faith. But what would the guys think of this twist of fate for the (self proclaimed) macho firefighter?

What is one to think if in reality the call to a deeper faith is present? If one is open to the call, and it is a true calling, everything else will somehow fall into place. The events and situations for growth will be presented and growth will take place. And so it did for the firefighter/teacher.

One Sunday, just before Mass ended, there was a call from the altar for help in the area of religious education. They were looking for teachers, and he wondered if this was what he was being called to. Not being quite sure if he was ready for this, the firefighter thought that if he put off calling the rectory long enough, they would have all the help they would need and he would be free to continue just as he was for the time being.

Well, wouldn't you know, he phoned the priest and was told that all the slots were filled but that he would keep him on the substitute list in the event a teacher were to call in sick. This was fine, and so he thought that he was off the hook, and that it didn't look like this was what he was being called to do. This proved to be incorrect when he received a call from the priest wanting to know if he was still interested in teaching, because one of his teacher's parents was ill and that teacher was not able to continue. He sure couldn't say no at that point if his word meant anything.

So, the "yes" to that priest led to teaching what was then called "CCD" or Confraternity of Christian Doctrine. The extra training that was involved led to certification as a master catechist with a concentration in youth ministry. Ah. This must have been what he was being called to. Time proved that it was only a step to something else within the Catholic Church.

The firefighter/CCD teacher was now involved in youth ministry, which led him to the experience of working on retreats for teens. The name of the retreat style was Teens Encounter Christ or TEC retreats. While on one of those retreats, he met a couple of young gentlemen who were also part of the retreat team. These two young men, who were in their late teens, appeared to be quite religious and spiritual in their own right. One evening, after all the scheduled programs were over, they invited the firefighter to a prayer service, and wondered if he was ever prayed over before. He said that he hadn't and thought that it would be interesting.

The chapel where the prayer service was to be held was set up in a monastic style, with seats and kneelers on both sides of the chapel, facing each other. The center was open, and the aisle led to an altar that was on a slightly raised platform. On the wall behind the altar was a huge crucifix. The vertical part of the cross was about twelve feet high and the horizontal span was around eight feet in length. A light was focused on the crucifix which made the body look life-like. A really neat feature of the entire chapel was the fact that the floors were heated.

This was quite appealing to the man who was taking part in the service because he often said that he did most of his best thinking while in a horizontal position, on his back, with his feet slightly raised. So

he asked the two young men if it would be all right to lie right in front of the altar, facing the crucifix with his feet resting on the platform that supported the altar. They thought that it was a bit unorthodox, but they both agreed to it. A small pillow was made available for his head and he took the new prayer position.

The two men positioned themselves by kneeling just behind the very comfortable-looking person who was lying on the floor and began to pray the Lord's Prayer. Then one of the guys produced some holy oil and made the sign of the cross on the comfortable one's forehead. Then they both extended their hands over him in prayer. At first it was silent but then strange words started coming from one of the guy's mouths. It almost sounded like the Polish language with the 'sh' and 'ch' sounding words; however, he was of Polish descent, and understood a little of the Polish language. This was not Polish.

While all this was going on, the CCD teacher was staring at the corpus of Jesus that was on the cross and felt a tingling sensation throughout his head. He then thought that these two guys were nuts and he wanted to get out, but for some reason he could not move. Now, he was a bit scared for this was something that he had never experienced in his entire life.

While he was experiencing the strange tongues, the tingling sensation, and inability to move, as soon as the young man who was praying switched his prayer to the "Hail Mary," all sensations stopped. The man on the floor, still focusing on the crucifix throughout all of this, immediately felt an extreme sense of peace, and while relaxing his arms out to his side to parallel the outstretched arms of Jesus, he silently said in his mind, "whatever you want me to do, I will do it. I am yours."

That began a chain of events that led him on an adventure that he would cherish for the rest of his life. And the adventure would include the fire services.