

Pat and Tom Crotty

A Mennonite Catholic Marriage

Tom Crotty, a Catholic who discovered Mennonites through his marriage to Pat Zeiset, tells the story of his journey across the bridge—and Pat adds what she has learned from the Catholic community they now belong to.

I grew up in a Catholic family, and was largely educated in Catholic schools. I attended graduate school in Philadelphia where I met my wife Pat, a Mennonite. We were married in Pat's home church, Bally Mennonite, and we lived in Lancaster County, real Amish and Mennonite country, for the first six years of our marriage.

Thirteen years and 2 children later we currently attend a small Catholic church in eastern Kentucky where we now live. I work as a psychologist and Pat teaches nursing at our community college. Daniel, aged 11, and Anna, aged 9, attend a Catholic elementary school in our town.

The Mennonite church experience started for me during my courting days with Pat. Visiting from Philadelphia on weekends I frequently attended Sunday worship with her family. I felt warmly welcomed and accepted. I shared meals, attended small group meetings with Pat, went on an overnight hike with the men of the church, went on a young adults retreat with Pat, participated in a foot washing ceremony, and of course shared several times in the Sunday worship.

Coming from the impersonality of Philadelphia's big and old Catholic churches, I found a worshiping community that was somehow familiar to me, in the literal sense of that word.

I saw and heard people I learned were truck drivers and electricians and school teachers during the week standing at the pulpit to lead worship services. They led with an ease and grace that I can understand only as inspired. As a Catholic used to formulaic prayer even by the ordained clergy, I remember feeling astounded at their confident eloquence in

spontaneous prayer—talking simply and prayerfully to God of the needs of the congregation, the community, and the world.

The pastor came to the pulpit to preach in the context of this shared calling, shared leadership, and shared responsibility. As



a Catholic, I grew up thinking presiding over worship required years of formal preparation in schools and seminaries—not to mention celibate commitment. In this Mennonite meeting I clearly saw evidence of years of spiritual formation, though obviously not in seminaries.

My second experience was at Philhaven, a mental health organization where I worked during the early 1990s. It was founded as a psychiatric hospital in the 1950's by Mennonites who did alternative service as conscientious objectors during World War II. From working in the frequently inferior conditions of state-run psychiatric facilities, many came back looking for another way to provide for emotional healing. This way of service at Philhaven has continued for over 50 years, serving thousands of people.

I completed my psychology internship at Philhaven as one of the very few facilities in the country that offered psychologists in training an opportunity for integration of Christian faith and psychology practice. Through the challenges of that intensive training year I and the three interns with me (none of us Mennonite) struggled to find ways our faith could make a difference in the work of healing.

How wonderfully Mennonite that struggle was! It was full of fellowship, service, prayer before staff meetings, and good food from the Philhaven kitchen. It was an experience marked from beginning to end by a shared commitment to the service of others. That experience continues to shape my professional life.

Paul Miller, a retired Mennonite seminary professor from Goshen College helped lead some of our intern seminars. He was an inspiration—open and curious in his seventies the way few of us are in our twenties, always searching for how he could be faithful to God’s calling, how he could serve. Pat and I got to know Paul and eventually participated in a small group with he and his wife and three other couples.

Both Pat and I remember Paul’s observation about our marriage as a Catholic and a Mennonite. He would move his hand vigorously up and down, enthusiastically describing the “vertical” character of my Catholic tradition. Then he proceeded to wave his arm across his chest proclaiming the “horizontal” character of the Mennonite spirit embodied in Pat’s Mennonite traditions.

We were joining our lives together in marriage and family, he said, integrating these horizontal and vertical traditions—the right fellowship of Mennonite witness and the sacramental vision of Catholicism.

Early on Pat and I often experienced our differing traditions as painful crosses to bear. We faced difficult issues of where to worship on Sunday, experiencing Pat’s exclusion from the Eucharist at Mass, wondering where and when children would be baptized—dilemmas our Mennonite and Catholic family and friends did not have to confront. Yet Paul made our bridging of these two traditions seem to be the most exciting adventure a Christian could hope for! His wonderful, expressive vertical and horizontal motions were an unmistakable gesture of blessing to me as a Catholic.

Pat and I have no doubt that God calls us to share our lives together as husband and wife—Catholic and Mennonite as those labels may apply. Sometimes we lose our way, and those are frightening and painful times. But sometimes as we travel along the margins, we come upon bridges that span impossible divides.

Our family’s Bridgefolk experience at St. John’s last July was such a delight. Sharing the wisdom, yearning, and openness of many minds and hearts to life at the margins—Mennonite and Catholic—was a wonderful consolation and encouragement. The metaphors of the bridge and life on the bridge were very much a part of our words and imaginations over those days at St. John’s.

Bridges are mostly for crossing, I think. My Catholic sensibility reminds me that there is a cross to take up in the crossing, at least if we are the followers of Christ we say we are. But what I now think of as a Mennonite sensibility grows in me, too.

I have come to know the joy of Christ’s promise in the music of song, a communion of many and varied voices. As I listen and sing, I am inspired beyond mere knowing that we are one body, one family of brothers and sisters—Catholic and Mennonite and beyond. How can I keep from singing? How can we keep from singing?

— Tom Crotty

Pat Crotty and Diane Yoder Hardt, both Mennonites, are the music leaders at the parish in Kentucky where their families are members. Mennonites are about 5% of the congregation most Sundays at St. Lukes.



It took more faith to go on with this into the unknown than to do the comfortable, predictable thing. I realized we weren’t going to be able to figure this all out before we took the leap of faith.

I would often sit and cry at Eucharist because I felt left out—something I couldn’t do with Tom. As a result Tom stopped going to communion. We tried different combinations. My experience of the Catholic Church was big formal churches in Philadelphia. They felt very foreign to me, although I was always comforted by the scriptures.

When we moved to Kentucky we asked, “What are we going to do about Church?” We prayed about it, and then soon after we arrived someone from St. Luke’s arrived with a cake to welcome us and now we feel we have found a place that takes the best of both and puts them together—community, discipleship, service, family, and scripture from the Mennonite tradition, added to liturgy and Eucharist from the Catholic tradition.

Sister Mary Catherine, the woman in charge of our little parish at the time could explain things in a way that helped me to understand, and St. Luke’s helped put Catholicism in context for me, by providing a sense of community. It is a context where it was so familiar, where it makes complete sense to me.

How can you not affirm the Catholic Church when you belong to St. Luke’s—made up of people who live out their faith in their work? I’ve become comfortable with the liturgy, with the comfort of a predictable form, which I’ve learned from being music leader each Sunday

I’m still a Mennonite in my heart, I’m just practicing my Mennonite faith in a Catholic church. I focus on the things in the Catholic mass that we have in common. I’m not troubled by that.

— Pat Zeiset Crotty

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