

This article was written by Fr. John in January 2014 for the Wonderblog, an OCA electronic publication for Youth and Young Adults. It is his answer to the question of "why are you still in the church?". While it is intended for that audience, it also provides a good introduction to Fr. John for present and potential parishioners of St. Luke.

Because God is with us, and He loves us

Fr. John Vitko

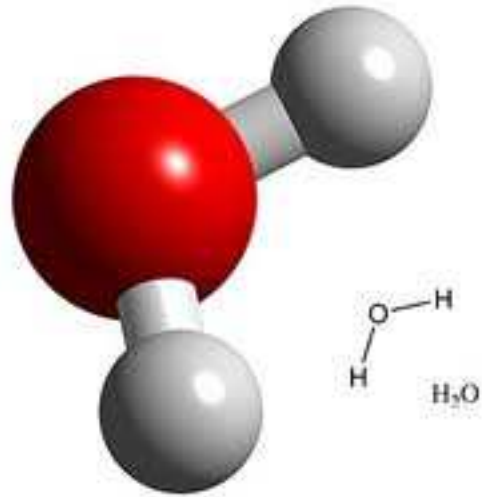
Why am I still here? Why do I still believe in God and still go to church? I suspect that these questions are being asked of me because I am relatively older (66 years old), am a physicist by training and have had a long and successful career as a government researcher and high level manager, and then retired, went to seminary and became a parish priest. So why am I still here in the Church?



The answer to this question has its beginning in my childhood. God was always present in our home and some of my earliest memories are of my parents taking me, and my brother, to church. The services were in Slavonic and we were too young to understand the words even if they were in English. Nevertheless, we felt and knew the presence of God in the somewhat darkened interior of the church; the flickering

candle light; the smoke, incense and icons; the deeply spiritual melodies that reached your inner being; and the reverential posture and attitude of those around us. God was here, we experienced it in all our senses and knew it in our 'inner heart' – we did not need to understand the words and did not have to reason to know it. For me, this experience was so overpowering that at times, I felt the church shake and thought God was speaking to me personally. Only years later did I find out that a subway train ran two blocks nearby and that was what I was feeling. And only decades later, did my daughter raise the question of whether that was just an amusing story or was God using something natural to speak to me. What is much more certain and much less questionable was that at the age of 10, I had a vision of Jesus with outstretched hands calling me to Him.

With a beginning like this, it is perhaps not surprising that I was interested in the priesthood as a little one. But, ever since the age of 8 or so when my father told me water had a formula, it was H_2O , I was also fascinated by science. Whether I would pursue a priestly calling or a scientific career was decided for me by one of those factors that only loom large for kids. I don't like fish – so I felt I couldn't fast – and so shouldn't become a priest. Therefore it was on to science: a specialized technical high school in New York City, undergraduate and then graduate studies in Physics, culminating in a Ph.D. from Cornell University. From there, I went on to a fulfilling research and management career at a government laboratory. I had the opportunity to work on many of the major technical issues confronting the Nation from the late 1970s until 2007: alternate energy sources; strategic defense; global climate change; environmental protection; and chemical and biological defense.



To me, my knowledge of science only deepened my awe of God. There was, and is, no conflict. Science answers the how but not the why. The love of the ever-existing God and Creator answers the why. O Lord, how manifold are Thy works, in wisdom Thou hast made them all!



With passing years, I continued to grow spiritually. Falling in love, marrying an incredible woman, having and raising children were not only blessings but also taught me how to love beyond myself in ways I couldn't imagine. And getting involved in a mission parish opened the doors to more active involvement in all

aspects of church life – from better knowledge of the services to teaching and outreach. Eventually, I enrolled in the Late Vocations Program, which exposed me to the full richness of Holy Tradition and the teaching of the Fathers and led to my ordination to the Holy Diaconate. The normal struggles of life – as uncomfortable as they may be – would also be a source of spiritual growth. There was a period of

about 6 months of long soul searching about career choices I was making– 6 months of ‘the dark night of the soul’– that was only relieved by a stranger, who in one of my government related meetings asked me if I was a Christian and when I answered yes, said “I thought so from the very first time I saw you in a meeting.” To me, this man was (and is) an angel sent by God. And there were several years of struggling over some outreach that my wife and I were doing that wasn’t going according to our plan. It took us a while to fully turn this over to God and realize that we were not in control. What a lesson in humility and at the same time what freedom – recognizing that we are not the ones in charge and responsible – but that God is. Constantly growing in God and being drawn closer to Him, I was blessed to be able to take early retirement from my science job and go to seminary and become a priest. What a blessing from God to be able to fulfill both my childhood dreams – to be both a physicist and a priest. And at the same time, what an awesome – and at times scary responsibility: to help others on their path to God. It was only by realizing that it is God who is the true minister to the people and not me and that, as it says in the prayers said during my ordination, God will provide that which is lacking and make whole that which is incomplete, that I was not constantly overwhelmed. My parish has been a source of great joy and of great spiritual growth for me. Now when I read the Scriptures and hear God’s word, it is not only in the light of my own immediate experiences but in the light of all that my parishioners are experiencing.

Contrary to what some would have us believe: God exists. The world is not a random happening. We are not bound by our genetics and our environment, but with God’s help, can rise up beyond them. Each and every one of us is made in the image of God. And each and every one is special and unique in the eyes of God. He loves each of us totally and unconditionally and there is

nothing we have done, nor that we can do, that will cause Him to stop loving us. And for that, I am eternally grateful. That is why I am still here!

