

Hello Everyone.

My name is Hilda Carrillo and up until several years ago the only time you would find me at Mass was during Christmas or Easter and actually there was a period of years when I did not even go.

I grew up Catholic but I stopped practicing the faith right when I got married. And while my children went to Catholic Schools, I stopped going to Mass. And while I believed in God and never stopped praying, looking back on my life, that search for something more only intensified, especially as my life got hard. Perhaps that is probably why I never stopped praying.

Then the lockdown happened and all these questions I had about life, meaning and purpose started to surface and I realized I had more questions than ever before, but no-where to process it because everything was shut down. And even when things started to open up, the Churches near my house were still closed. I began to wonder if all the Churches were going to remain closed, I started praying about it and it was around that time when a good friend of mine, Irene Guarascio, invited me to go with her to listen to one of her nephew's services. I was surprised that there was a Church that was holding services because all the Churches near me were closed. So we came here to Our Lady of Mercy. I was sitting in the pew just like you are now when I heard someone talk about, Alpha.

And that is what I am here to speak with you briefly about. Alpha is for everyone, no matter where you are, or, are not, in your faith life. It starts out with free, delicious dinner, followed by live music, a talk on the Christian faith and then a group discussion.

It was not like I was doing anything during the week given not much was open, so I decided to sign up and go to Alpha. Here is the thing about me, I live by Midway Airport but it really wasn't a big deal for me to drive an hour each way. And I am thankful that I felt and still feel that way, because going to Alpha in person in the Fall of 2020 changed my life.

You see, we all need a place to process life's deepest questions. A place to feel heard, a place to feel understood, a place to feel seen, a place to feel loved. And although I had good friends it was hard not to feel like you're in it alone or that sometimes no one gets me. But in Alpha, I felt heard, I felt understood, I felt loved. And what blew me away, was that I was surrounded by loving people that made it safe to ask questions, without judgement. My gracious and awesome group leaders, Joe Glasgow and Gerri Fry, accompanied me during those 11 weeks of Alpha, they made every one of us in their group feel wanted, loved and accepted, to be known for who we really are, flaws and all.

Because I loved my time at Alpha, I decided to sign up again for the next one in January 2021, I brought a friend with me, along with the questions I still had. My faith in God started to deepen and God

started to bless me with so many friends I made, because I started not just going to Alpha, but also participating in the parish life offerings they had here at Our Lady of Mercy.

Someone asked me that now that I attended Alpha twice and that the churches near Midway are now open, if I was going to stop coming to Our Lady of Mercy. I said to her, how can I stop coming here when God has blessed me so much by sending me to this parish. This parish has offered me so much, from the Bible Studies I participate in, to signing up for my third Alpha by being on the team and being extremely blessed by that. It boils down to what we can do to create a closer relationship with the Lord. It does not bother me one bit to drive an hour to get here. Why?... because for me, Jesus is more than worth it. People work an hour away! Coming here once, actually sometimes three times a week is so worth it because Our Lady of Mercy has become a place where I don't just feel like I belong, it's also the conviction that I do belong here, because of the friendships I've made, and more importantly because of the deeper relationship I now have with Jesus.

So I pray you consider signing up for Alpha. It starts in person on Thursday Jan 20th and online on Wednesday Jan 19th. There is a group for everyone but also for young adults, families with children and a Spanish group.

Like Jesus states in the book of John 1:39, "Come and See." We all have a journey with God, come and explore Alpha and see how you too can grow in your faith.

Do you need a welcoming and safe place to process what you've been through this past year or a place to process life's deepest questions? Or perhaps you are in the same boat I was when I first came to Mass at Our Lady of Mercy, I said to myself, "Why not, what have I got to lose by giving Alpha a try."

I will be at the entrance and will gladly answer any questions or concerns you may have. Thank you for your time and have a very Merry Christmas.