

A GROUNDED FAITH

Brandon and Lauren Sheard left academia for agriculture and the Catholic Church

By Nathan Whalen

On the Sunday after Easter, Brandon Sheard rises well before dawn on his family's 2-acre Vashon Island farm. The father of five leaves his home and adjacent workshop, where a small image of St. George, the patron of butchers, hangs high above the workbench. The artisanal butcher is headed to church, where two lambs he slaughtered several days earlier are waiting.

By 5:30 a.m., Brandon is roasting the lambs — one on a metal cross (a traditional Argentine style), the other on a spit — over an open fire on the grounds of St. John Vianney Parish. Around 4 p.m., the lambs are pronounced done. A crowd has gathered at the Vashon Island parish in anticipation; some years as many as 180 people come from as far away as Kent and Maple Valley. They pray the Chaplet of Divine Mercy, then share in the feast.

Rich in Christian symbolism, the annual lamb roast on Divine Mercy Sunday is an expression of the Sheard family's unity with the land and a celebration of their journey to the Catholic Church.



Brandon and his wife Lauren were confirmed at the Easter Vigil in 2011, a week before hosting their first Divine Mercy lamb roast. “As ex-Protestants, we were longing for all that the feasts of the church had to offer,” Brandon explained.

Today, the couple weaves their faith into the fabric of family life on their small farm, nestled in the woods on the south end of Vashon. The Sheards grow a significant amount of their food, are raising four piglets and heat their home with wood gathered from their property.

They follow a Benedictine pattern of life, finding strength in Mass and the Liturgy of the Hours. With their children, ages 7 and younger, the Sheards read the daily Gospel selection before breakfast and pray the Angelus before lunch.

“Prayer has been our faith anchor,” Lauren said. She and Brandon sing compline, or night prayer, to their children before bedtime. “It’s humbling to see their faith lives blossom in that way,” said Lauren, who prays the rosary each night.

From academia to agriculture

For Brandon and Lauren, the path to Catholicism began in deeply committed Christian families that were evangelical, nondenominational and Calvinist.

The pair met on a blind date in 2007, while attending graduate school at different universities in southern California. Both were working on master’s degrees: Brandon in Renaissance English literature, Lauren in theology and psychology. Their first conversation was about Friedrich Nietzsche, the atheistic German philosopher.

Brandon was more dismissive of Catholicism than Lauren: She wore a medallion of Mary, picked up during a visit to Rome. As their relationship flourished, they were growing disillusioned with academia and developing an appreciation for liturgical worship.

Looking for a simpler lifestyle, they moved in 2008 to Vashon Island, where Brandon’s parents were living. The young couple loved the rural culture and built their first home through a sweat-equity program. Meanwhile, Brandon was growing weary of his commute to work in Seattle.

After he and Lauren were married in June 2008, Brandon quit his job. He started knocking on doors on Vashon, looking for work. Eventually, he landed a job at Sea Breeze Farm, where he learned the butcher business and sold fresh meat at farmers markets throughout the Seattle area.

Busy with his new career, Brandon didn’t have time to go to church. As a Protestant, he explained, it was theoretically OK because of the primacy of a personal relationship with God.

But Lauren wanted to be part of a faith community. She started church-hopping on Vashon, then met Mary Lawrence, a Catholic whose husband worked alongside Brandon. Mary invited Lauren to the Good Friday service at St. John Vianney, where Lauren felt transformed by kissing the cross for the first time.

Mary gave Lauren a copy of the Catechism of the Catholic Church, and the friends began going to Mass while their husbands worked the farmers markets. The two families grew close, enjoying Sunday night dinners, raising animals together and often talking about the homilies from Mass.

Connected to God’s creation

While Lauren was discovering the Catholic Church, Brandon was content living in his own little agrarian paradise.

The couple started their business, Farmstead Meatsmith, in 2010 so Brandon could spend more time with his family. Traveling around the Puget Sound region, he provides custom butchering to small farms, employing traditional methods. His focus is on treating the animals humanely and teaching others the time-honored techniques.

“I want to elevate the dignity of the animal,” Brandon said.

Even some vegetarians have enrolled in his classes. People want to know a slaughter can occur in accordance with an animal’s nature, he explained.

Being a butcher allows Brandon to put food directly on the table for his family and keeps him connected to God’s creation.

“I think you become more estranged from yourself as you become more alienated from the things that sustain your life,” he said. The hundreds of pounds of meat harvested from each animal are an example of God’s abundance, he added.



Brandon and Lauren Sheard follow a Benedictine pattern of life with their children: Simon, Wallace, John, Mary and baby Beatrice.

Stephen Beshner



Stephen Brashner

Prayer has been a “faith anchor” for Brandon and Lauren Sheard, whether at home or attending Mass at their parish, St. John Vianney on Vashon Island.

Something missing

Even though things were going well with his family and new business, spiritually “I could tell something was missing,” Brandon said.

He started re-reading the works of familiar theologians, particularly Calvin and Luther. This time, he was not impressed. What did make an impression was a book Lauren shared with him: *Man and Woman He Created Them: A Theology of the Body*, by Pope John Paul II, translated by Michael Waldstein.

“It was so undeniably beautiful and Christian,” Brandon said of the book, which describes the purpose and beauty of the human person, male and female.

It was revolutionary to him that a pope could be intelligent, Brandon said, but John Paul II’s answers “were so simply and beautifully Christ-centered that I had to admit that the Catholic Church and her teaching was more Christian than I was.”

As Brandon and Lauren journeyed to the Catholic Church, they were helped by a tight-knit group of neighbors, devout in their faith and in their respect for the land.

One of those neighbors, Collin Medeiros, invited Brandon to attend a talk about the Virgin Mary, presented by Catholic author Mark Shea at a Bremerton parish. Shea’s words alleviated any concerns Brandon had that devotion to Mary would detract from Christ. Afterward, waiting for the ferry back to Vashon, Brandon, Lauren and Collin prayed the rosary together for the first time.

Brandon was now “cognitively” a Catholic, he said. All that

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Brandon Sheard

THE JOURNEY HOME

Brandon Sheard discussed his journey to the Catholic Church on the EWTN program *The Journey Home*. Watch the interview at www.chnetwork.org — search for “Brandon Sheard.”

remained was going through the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults at St. John Vianney Parish and being confirmed.

God first, family second

Lauren’s RCIA sponsor was her friend Mary Lawrence; Brandon’s sponsor was a neighbor, Marcus Daly. Recognizing Brandon’s strong evangelical background, Daly said the best way to guide Brandon was to simply get out of his way.

Brandon was drawn to simple aspects of the Mass, such as making the sign of the cross and kneeling during prayer. “He was encountering the sacramental reality of the Catholic Church and, as a husband and father, that resonated with him,” Daly said.

A week after being received into full communion with the church in 2011, the Sheards — parents of two boys at the time — had their children baptized on Divine Mercy Sunday, and began the tradition of roasting a lamb that day. This year, the day took on more meaning with the baptism of their fifth child, Beatrice Johanna Maria, born March 10.

Today, the Sheards are active members of St. John Vianney, where Brandon teaches a faith formation class for several teenagers. The neighbors who helped the couple on their journey to the church appreciate the way they have embraced the faith.

“Brandon and Lauren are a tremendous inspiration to lots of people on this island,” Daly said. “They live their faith. They put God first and family second.”

DIVINE MERCY LAMB ROAST

Watch a previous year’s Divine Mercy lamb roast at www.farmsteadmeatsmith.com/feast-of-divine-mercy.